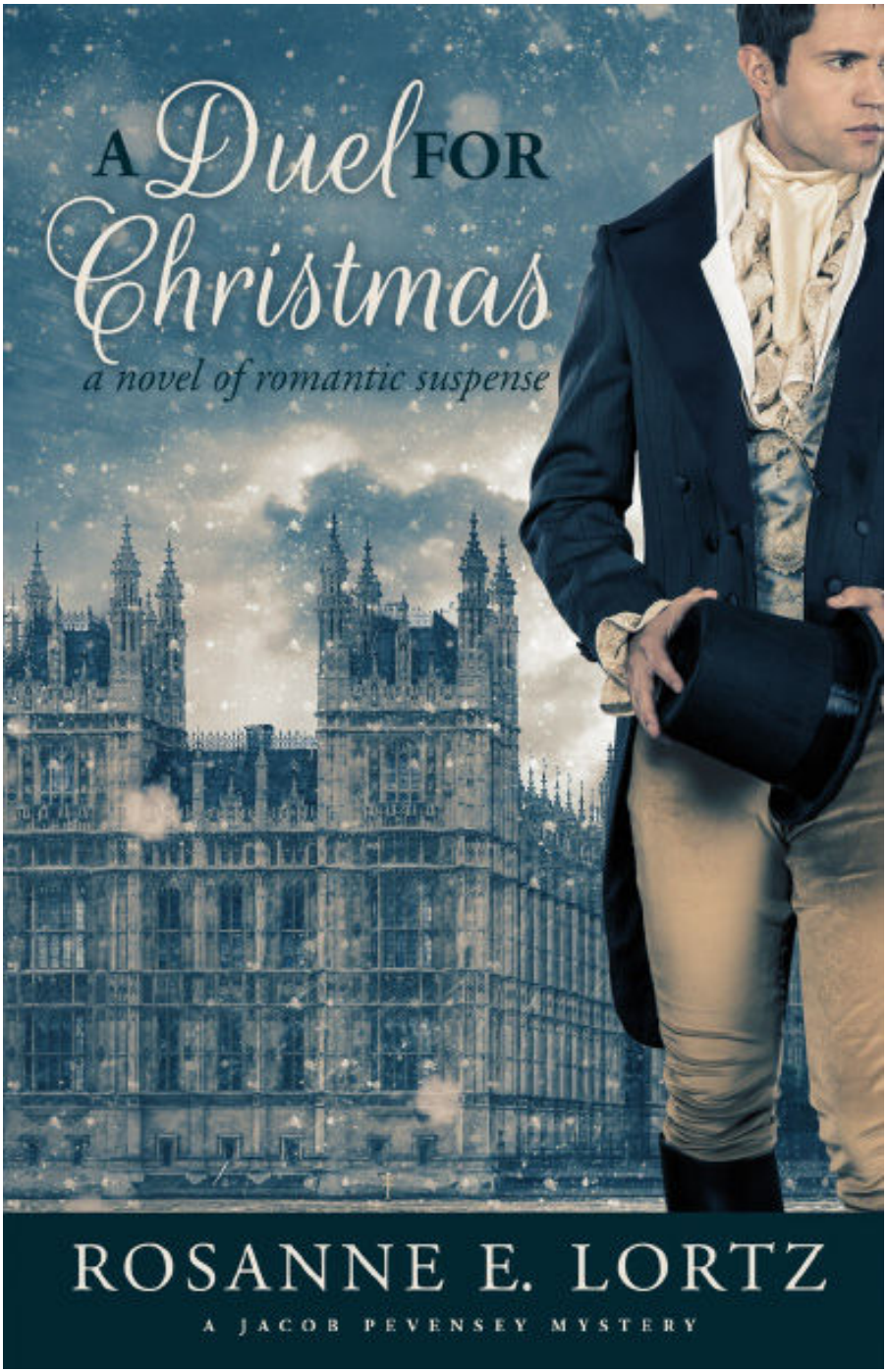


ROSANNE E. LORTZ

A JACOB PEVENSEY MYSTERY


A Duel FOR Christmas
a novel of romantic suspense
ROSANNE E. LORTZ
A JACOB PEVENSEY MYSTERY

To Masha,
in gratitude for her mentorship
in the world of publishing

The Eve of Christmas

CHAPTER ONE

"Were you surprised?" asked Lady Aldine, leaning in towards her daughter as they eyed the crowded ballroom.

"Very much so," replied Maud, drinking her punch more quickly than was wise. She had expected Christmas Eve to be a quiet family dinner, but when Will had announced his engagement, a whirlwind of preparations had turned a plum pudding for four into a supper ball for four score. As the string players struck up a new dance, Maud watched Will leading his future bride Helena out for a cotillion.

The young lady's parents had possessed excellent foresight when they provided her with a name—Maud doubted that even Helen of Troy would have eclipsed Lady Helena Angiers in loveliness. Indeed, it was not surprising that Will had succumbed to this blond goddess' charms. The surprising thing was that he had overcome his aversion to responsibility enough to promise matrimony to…anyone. And—wonder of wonders!—he had told his parents just three days ago that he meant to be leg-shackled as soon as the banns could be published. He was only one and twenty—and yet, Maud had been even younger than that when she had given up her own freedom….

"They do make a pretty picture," said Lady Aldine with a maternal sigh. Above the dance floor, garlands of holly, ivy, and evergreen—all hung this morning—created a festive ceiling. And below, in a white dress with white Christmas roses in her hair, Helena hung upon Will's arm.

Maud looked into the depths of her empty punch cup and wrinkled her nose. Certainly, Helena looked lovely in the white crepe, but it was not at all the style of beauty that Maud admired or desired for herself. As a childless widow of twenty-six, she had ceased to wear blacks as soon as she had returned to London. It curtailed her period of mourning far sooner than society dictated, but it was a conscious

decision to reclaim life on her own terms. And while the debutantes present were all blushing in pastel muslins, her own Christmas Eve dress was a vibrant red that could not be ignored.

On the dance floor, the steps of the cotillion whirled faster and faster. A few of Helena's blond curls came unpinned. Maud saw her step falter a little as she leaned on Will's arm. She whispered something in his ear, and a moment later, they quitted the dance to find a chair on the side of the room.

"Are you all right, my dear?" asked Lady Aldine, coming towards them and offering Helena her fan. Maud trailed along behind her mother.

"Oh, yes," said the girl, coloring. "I think I am just overheated." She took the painted fan and began to wave it breathlessly.

"I shall get you some punch," said Will.

"Thank you, my love," said the girl, her blue eyes shining as they looked at Will.

Maud's nose wrinkled again. Will was besotted enough now, but how much attention would he pay the girl once he tired of her in the next few months? For tire he would—it was Will's way. He could never stay at a pursuit long enough to see it out to its end.

"Taking care of my sister, Aldine?" said a stranger's voice. A young man, tall and golden-haired, came up behind Will and placed a firm grip on his left shoulder.

Will winced and then shrugged off the man's hand with a groan. "Easy there, Tilbury." He pulled away, his opposite hand holding his shoulder tenderly. "You'll be happy to hear I am this very moment off to fetch her a cold drink."

"Very good," said the man, and Maud could see his eyes follow Will carefully as he moved away to the refreshment table. They were shrewd eyes, and not altogether genial.

"Lord Tilbury," said Maud's mother, "I don't believe you have met my daughter, Lady Maud Worlington. She has just come up from the country to join us at Grosvenor Square." She turned to Maud and offered an explanation of the man's identity. "Geoffrey is Helena's brother and guardian."

Maud stared. Guardian? Despite his height, he did not look a week older than Will. She was not aware that Helena's parents were dead—but then, she was not aware of much about the situation. She had arrived in London only two days ago to a house ringing with news of the impending nuptials.

“Enchanted to meet you, Lady Worlington,” said the Duke of Tilbury perfunctorily. He reached for Maud’s hand and pressed it to his lips in courtly fashion. But his eyes—those serious green eyes—were still scanning the room.

The warmth of his lips through the thin silk fabric of Maud’s glove took her back to her first ball. How long had it been since she had stood up for her first dance? Seven years? Eight? And this fellow, surely, must have been reading at his Latin with a tutor while she was dancing the cotillion at her own coming-out ball. Suddenly, she felt old, so very old, but even at such a moment, her manners did not fail her. She dropped a curtsy. “And I am pleased as well, Lord Tilbury—pleased to welcome your sister, and you, into our family.”

He nodded, and Maud could not help feeling that his wandering eyes were scanning the room for more amusing company. The last time she had stood up at a ball in her parents’ home, she had been a desirable debutante. And now she was a widow, long past her first bloom and not at all in demand as a dancing partner.

The music stopped and a dozen couples came off the dance floor in a flurry of laughter and gaiety. Lord Tilbury planted himself behind Helena’s chair, feet apart, hands folded behind his back, in the position of a sentry. He cleared his throat. “I have not seen Lord Aldine yet tonight,” he observed to his hostess.

Lady Aldine clucked gently. “No, you have not. My husband does not enjoy these late evenings. He much prefers a large fire, a warm posset, and an early bedtime.” She looked up at the painted ceiling of the ballroom. “I imagine he’s upstairs now, wishing all these dancers would tire themselves out and go home”—she smiled at Helena—“while *I* am only too happy to have them stay. It is the loveliest kind of Christmas, to celebrate the gift of another daughter with such a celebration.”

Helena blushed again and continued to wave the fan. “Thank you, my lady.”

Just then, Will returned, sliding into the chair beside Helena and pressing a full cup of punch into her hand. The duke nodded at Will and maintained his position. There was something military about it. Maud reflected that she would have disliked the surveillance excessively if she had been in Helena’s shoes. But then, it must be acknowledged that an older brother’s company was not so trying as the company of a younger brother.

“Where is Ralph?” asked Maud. It was Christmas Eve, after all, and

though he did not normally associate with their circles of acquaintances, she had expected to see her half-brother here tonight.

"He had another engagement," said Lady Aldine. "I am sorry, for I am certain he should lead you out if he were here."

Will—mischievous Will—glanced at Maud and glanced again at his future brother-in-law. "I must keep Helena company or I would do the honors, but Geoffrey here has nimble feet." He waved his hand to the sentinel behind his chair.

Maud's mouth opened and then closed. She had certainly not meant to give the impression that she was begging for a partner—but then again, she was not averse to offering Will this small service. She could sacrifice herself for one dance so that he could be rid of an over-zealous chaperon. She stared frankly into the duke's eyes. If he did not want to dance with her, he would have to be the one to make his excuses.

"Far be it from me to contradict my future brother-in-law," said the duke. His words were amiable, but Maud could see his jaw tightening beneath his golden sideburns. "Lady Worlington, I would be honored if you would join me for the next dance."

O

AS HE LED Lady Worlington out onto the dance floor, Geoffrey cast a sideways glance at his sister. He had warned Helena, most explicitly, that despite the betrothal having been solemnized, there would still be no wandering off into dark alcoves with young Aldine. He did not want a breath of scandal surrounding Helena's name.

"Shall we join this set?" asked Lady Worlington, her gloved hand applying a gentle pressure to his own as they promenaded along the side of the dance floor.

"But of course!" said Geoffrey, trying to focus himself on the duty at hand. He positioned himself and his partner at the foot of the closest set of dancers. In normal circumstances, he would be delighted to partner an attractive woman like Lady Worlington, but tonight his mind was on other matters….

He was glad his father was no longer here to see how he had bungled things. But then again, if his father *had* been alive, things might have never come to such a pass.

As they waited for the music to begin, Geoffrey could see that his partner was expecting some sort of conversation from him. He leaned

in, choosing from the stock of compliments that he had paid to a dozen different ladies. “I must say, Lady Worlington, you are by far the most vibrant flower in the room.”

Any of his sister’s friends would have blushed or simpered, but Lady Worlington did neither.

“You are not required to pay me compliments, your grace.”

It was a set-down but not a vehement one. Shocked out of his apathy, Geoffrey began to examine Lady Worlington seriously for the first time that evening. “Perhaps I simply choose to do so.”

“As I simply choose to wear bright colors.”

Geoffrey could certainly see why. The ruby red dress set off her warm skin tone to advantage as the scalloped neckline skimmed the top of her full bosom. Geoffrey began to wonder if his perfunctory compliment was in fact perilously close to the truth.

“Bright colors suit you. You must be glad then that your period of mourning is over.”

She released his hand. “Why, yes. I am. Although it is bold of you to say as much to a stranger.”

“Not quite a stranger. I have made extensive inquiries about your family ever since I observed your brother’s interest in my sister.”

He glanced back at Helena, but she seemed to merely be pursuing an innocuous conversation with Will. She had finished her glass of punch and a servant was handing her another. One of her friends, a black-haired miss from Sussex, had come over to talk with them. The tension in Geoffrey’s shoulders relaxed a little. Edwina Cecil was a sensible girl. As long as she was at Helena’s side, all would be well.

“Oh?” Lady Worlington’s mouth pursed into an attractive pout. Geoffrey could see her eyes were following his own as he glanced over at Helena and Miss Cecil. The music began to play, and they turned a few figures in the reel before they were facing each other once again. “And what did you uncover in the course of your inquiries?”

“One elder sister, married to Sir Humboldt Worlington but lately widowed, ensconced at her late husband’s estate in Devon for the past half a dozen years.”

“How kind of you to use the word ‘ensconced.’ I should think ‘moldering’ would be more apt.” Her eyes glittered dangerously as she said that, and Geoffrey knew better than to agree with her.

“Moldering? From my inquiries, yes, one might think you a veritable relic. But in person—well, let us just say you look far different than I imagined.”

They were back in the dancing set again, and Lady Worlington waited for a couple more allemandes before she began to quiz him. “I am afraid I am behind the times, Lord Tilbury, for I have yet to make inquiries about *your* family. Pray, when did you come into your responsibilities? You seem over-young to be your sister’s sole guardian.”

Geoffrey took her hand to promenade down the center of the set of couples. “Young?” He affected an air of injured feelings. “I will have you know, Lady Worlington that I attained the age of majority six months ago, at which time I was emancipated from my own guardians and became Helena’s guardian.”

And was currently making rather a mull of it, he reflected to himself—but that part was best left unsaid. A darting glance showed that Miss Cecil had disappeared and that Helena and Will had left their chairs and were wandering towards the corner of the ballroom. Geoffrey felt his shoulders tighten again. He shot a quick glance at the string players, wondering how many more bars there were to this reel.

“How curious!” replied Lady Worlington. “Six months ago was precisely the time of my husband’s death.”

Geoffrey’s eyebrows arched. The way she mentioned the event—baldly, casually, artlessly—took him by surprise. He still felt his father’s death keenly, and it had been years since he had last seen his face. “I offer my condolences, Lady Worlington, although the look on your charming face tells me they may be superfluous.”

Geoffrey cast his eye over to the corner of the room and saw that Helena and Will were almost out of sight now. He gritted his teeth. Why had he allowed Will to trap him into dancing a reel?

He turned back and realized that Lady Worlington had said something to him, and that, in his distraction, he had heard none of it. “I beg your pardon, my lady. Could you repeat that?”

Lady Worlington’s dark eyes covered over with a veil of eyelashes. “Oh, it is no matter, Lord Tilbury. I am afraid my company, or this dance, bores you—I will not hazard a guess as to which. Perhaps I might plead a headache so you can be excused?”

“Lady Worlington, I protest!” For the first time that evening, a hint of embarrassment suffused Geoffrey’s face, as inwardly, at least, he was forced to acknowledge the justice of her complaint.

“Methinks thou dost protest too much.” She put her hand to her temple, and within seconds, Geoffrey found himself putting Lady Worlington’s arm in his and leading her over to some chairs. “Might I

bring you a glass of punch?"

"No, no," she said, adjusting her ruby red skirt as she took a seat, her matching red slippers tucked neatly beneath the hem of her dress. "I am certain you have more important things to attend to."

He felt a twinge of guilt at that. Usually, he prided himself on his ability to manage the fairer sex. But here was Lady Worlington, feigning headache to avoid dancing with him. And there was Helena, ignoring all the express commands he had delivered in the carriage. It was not a good night for Geoffrey Angiers.

O

MAUD WATCHED OUT of the corner of her eye as the Duke of Tilbury disappeared into the crowd. She had certainly not bored handsome young men when she was a fresh-faced girl just out of the schoolroom, but now her world was old and worn and she with it. She forced her eyes to turn away and let his tall shoulders dissolve into the distance. What did it matter? If she had based her contentment these last seven years on how she was treated by men, she would be a wailing woman in an asylum.

No, it was better to find approbation from one's own conscience, in a life well lived full of faith, hope, and charity. And though her conscience was not entirely clear and her contentment not perpetually present, she *was* trying.

It did not take many minutes for her mother to find her again, eager that Maud should meet the set with whom the Aldines mingled. The lace-capped dowagers grinned toothily as Lady Aldine refreshed their acquaintance with her daughter. Maud wondered if perhaps *she* ought to have worn a cap too, in the manner of many widows. And then she was whirled across the room to meet some of her father's associates. She smiled her way through a dance with a red-faced colonel and exercised all her ingenuity to draw out the tongue-tied younger son of a baronet.

After an hour peppered with introductions and dancing, she finally found a bank of chairs again only to discover Lady Helena sitting down beside her. Helena was alone now. Will must have sloped off to play cards, an inauspicious start to a betrothal. Maud took a glass of punch from the silver tray that a footman was offering, and Helena took a glass as well.

"A beautiful celebration," said Maud encouragingly. There was no

need to dwell on Will's absence if Helena was not affected by it.

That hope proved too sanguine for truth, however. A closer examination of Helena soon showed a gray cast to her face and a dullness in her blue eyes that had not been there earlier.

"Oh, yes, very beautiful," said Helena faintly, taking a sip of the punch. Her hands shook a little as they tried to steady the glass.

"My dear," said Maud, taking Helena's punch cup away from her so that she had one glass in each of her own hands, "you look ill." She nodded for the footman to return and placed both glasses back on the silver tray. "Come, take my arm."

Helena was looking positively green now. Maud gripped Helena under the elbow tightly enough to propel her across the floor. "Only a little farther," she whispered, pasting a smile across her own face so as not to draw attention from other guests.

Within seconds, they had exited the double doors of the ball room and rounded the corner to a small closet that the Aldines used as a powder room. Maud barely had time to shut the door and pull back Helena's trailing curls before the girl was casting up her accounts in the wash basin.

After Helena had ceased being sick, Maud handed her a square of clean linen to wipe her face. "How do you feel now, Lady Helena?"

"Thank you, Lady Worlington. I feel…that I should like to go home."

"It seems advisable," said Maud. She gave the girl's hand a squeeze so that she would not feel so much a stranger. "I will order your carriage round and fetch your brother. Should I say anything to W—?"

"No, no. He was enjoying his game of whist when I left him, and I would not want to disturb him." Helena's pinched face was a far cry from the glowing beauty she had exhibited earlier. Maud could see the hint of tears forming in the corners of the girl's blue eyes. Perhaps she was not ready for Will to see her in such a state.

"I shall be as discreet as a dormouse," said Maud, closing the door of the small closet to give Helena privacy.

Once back in the ballroom, Maud surmised that Lord Tilbury would be easy to spot—after all, he was half a head taller than all the other gentlemen—but a quick scan of the floor displayed no head of golden curls. She realized then that he had probably followed Will into the card room and, catching up a handful of her red skirt in her left hand, she hurried in that direction.

There he was, his back against the wainscoting, just one member

of the circle of men watching Will wax grandiloquent at the gaming table. Maud glanced at the small book the gamekeeper was tabulating —the stakes were very high. Will must be lucky indeed if his quarterly allowance from Father was enough to float that wager.

A few gentlemen smiled at her sudden appearance as she glided past them to get to Lord Tilbury. When she paused beside his elbow, the duke looked down, surprised.

"Lady Worlington?"

"Your sister is quite ill," she murmured. "I've ordered the carriage, and it were best you take her home immediately."

He did not hesitate for even a fraction of a second. "Thank you, I shall come straightway." Maud slipped around the corner to leave and noticed that Lord Tilbury had the good sense to wait a moment before following her. There was no use drawing attention to her message or to Helena's departure.

Once in the entrance hall, he was all expedition. He retrieved his hat and gloves from the butler and stood to attention by the door while Maud helped Helena on with her cloak and muff.

"Lady Worlington, I am mortified," said Helena, her hands shaking a little.

"No need, my dear," said Maud kindly. She stepped away and stood by the open door while the duke led his sister down the steps and deposited her in the waiting carriage.

Then, closing the carriage door to block the wind, he looked back to the house. "My lady," he said, bowing, "I am in your debt."

Through the open front door, the clock in the entrance wall began to strike the hour and the changing of the day. A gust of wind caught the door, and Maud grabbed at it before it could swing all the way open. A smile came over Lord Tilbury's face as they waited out the twelve chimes together.

"A happy Christmas to you, Lord Tilbury," said the dark-haired widow from Devon.

"And a happy Christmas to you, Lady Worlington," said the duke of one and twenty.

The First Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 2

Seven years ago, Maud would have lain underneath her goose down comforter until it was nearly noon and found some way or another to avoid going to church on Christmas morning. But seven years was a long time. Country life had accustomed herself to rising early, and the vicissitudes of fortune had convinced her of the necessity of religion. And besides, it was impossible not to open her eyes when the white light of winter came filtering in from behind the curtains.

Her maid Perkins had already laid out her morning dress, an emerald velvet with a square neck that was well-suited to church but also to the Christmas season. One of the few bright spots of Maud's exile in Devon had been the liberal amount of pin money that Humboldt had allowed her. There were not many things she would miss about that period of her life, but the financial ability to have a new dress made up whenever she was bored or irritable or sad was one of them.

"And how was the ball last night, my lady?" asked Perkins, bustling about the room with an indefatigable industry. She was a Devon girl who had begun as a housemaid at the Worlington estate and been promoted by Maud to lady's maid. It had been comforting to have a young person about, someone closer to her own age than a husband forty years her senior, and her liveliness often buoyed Maud's spirit whenever her sails threatened to fall flat in the doldrums.

"Well enough," said Maud. "I met the Duke of Tilbury, Lady Helena's brother."

Perkins whistled. "Lawks, he is a sightly gent if I ever saw one. I watched him come inside from the upstairs windows. How did he dance with those long shanks of his?"

Maud burst out laughing. "Very well, indeed, but he was not keen on dancing with *me*."

"Hmph, the more fool him!" said Perkins loyally. She helped Maud on with her petticoat and began to lace up the green velvet in the back. Following this, Maud sat down at her mirror, and Perkins'

nimble fingers twisted and curled her dark hair, fixing it in place with little pearl pins.

Maud fell into pensive reflection as she submitted her scalp to Perkins' ministrations. She looked at herself in the glass. Squinting, she rubbed a finger over the little lines that appeared at the corners of her eyes.

"Stop that," admonished Perkins, tapping her mistress' shoulder with a brush. "You're making those lines appear yourself."

Maud dropped her hands into her lap guiltily as if she had been caught in some misdeed. "I don't know—I can't help feeling that I am looking a little…haggard."

"Pish!" said Perkins, handing Maud a vial of rose water with more force than was necessary. She stepped back, her duties completed, and Maud sprinkled some of the perfumed liquid around her shoulders and then rose to her feet.

"Now then, my lady," said Perkins, "I shall send down the ermine muff and your white spencer for church. Hurry along and get some breakfast—you'll feel much brighter with a full stomach." She shooed Maud to the door, before offering one last piece of advice: "Keep an eye out for mistletoe, my lady. The first footman caught me under it last night near the kitchen and would not let go till I gave him a buss on the cheek and a little more besides."

"Oh dear!" said Maud, unsure whether this was a warning or an encouragement. "I hope you slapped him roundly."

"You know me, my lady," said Perkins with a saucy wink.

Maud grinned and shook her head. She did know Lucy Perkins, and more likely than not, *she* was the one who had laid the trap for the footman. "Thank you for the warning, but I doubt I shall be in any danger." She wrinkled her nose. She was a widow, and a staid one at that. Her qualities, now, lay in usefulness rather than ornament. And if her charms could not even tempt an unattached bachelor to wait out a reel at her side, there was little likelihood of anyone stealing kisses from her, mistletoe or not.

O

GEOFFREY SAT UP straight in the pew.

"Please, Geoffrey," whispered Helena.

"Sh!" he said. "The service is not over."

"Very well, but why can't we go?"

“Because we went there last night, and you went home sick. And Christmas is for family.”

“But they are my future family!”

“Sh!” Geoffrey set his jaw firm and inflexible. He had ignored and indulged her far too much, and look at where that had gotten them. He must play the tyrant now although it was not in his nature to behave so. He had firmly resolved and would not alter his mind in any way—they would *not* be eating Christmas dinner at the Aldine house in Grosvenor Square.

Unfortunately, Geoffrey had not counted on the fact that Lord Aldine, Lady Aldine, and their progeny would also be attending the Christmas morning service at Westminster. Helena flew like a homing pigeon right into Will’s hands as soon as the bishop had dismissed the congregation.

Geoffrey trailed behind her, trying to paper over his annoyance with a smile. Lady Aldine looked a little tired, no doubt exhausted from the ball last night; Lord Aldine, even more so, having his age instead of the ball as his excuse. Geoffrey did not know exactly how old Helena’s prospective father-in-law was, although, if pressed, he would estimate close to seventy. Evidently, the viscount had married later in life, for while he was now wrinkled and quite gray, his wife Juliana still looked to be in her prime—a December-May alliance if Geoffrey had ever seen one.

He narrowed his eyes as he saw Will caressing Helena’s hand, and his gaze flicked back toward the viscount. A younger father might have kept his son in check, but then Harry Aldine had been well-on fifty by the time his heir was born. No doubt the old man turned a blind eye to his son’s *many* deficiencies.

The Aldines’ daughter, Lady Worlington, hung back a little from the group, anchoring her hand upon one of the stone pillars as the crowd of exiting churchgoers surged about her. Geoffrey found himself wishing he could catch her eye, but she had either not noticed him or was more interested in other acquaintances. She was looking lovely again, this time in a dark green dress with a smart white spencer jacket. The London streets were gray with rain, but she, at least, reminded him of the sparkle and freshness of Christmas snow.

“We are headed home for Christmas dinner,” said Lady Aldine, taking Geoffrey’s hand and squeezing it. “Would you and Helena care to join us?”

Geoffrey schooled his face into a look of regret. “How considerate

of you, Lady Aldine, but we have a roast goose cooking at home."

Helena's pretty face popped in between them. "But it was a kind thought, Lady Aldine, especially since it will be a difficult Christmas alone, without…." Her voice choked up, and Geoffrey could almost see tears forming on the edges of her eyes. Crocodile tears, he was certain of it. They had celebrated Christmas many years as orphans without any such show of sentimentality.

"Oh, you poor dears!" said Lady Aldine, completely taken in. "You must not be alone! You must come over straightway and dine with us."

"I thank you for the offer," said Geoffrey, sending a daggered glance at his sister, "but we would not wish to intrude."

"There is nothing to intrude on," said Lady Aldine. "And even if there were, we should not mind. There is plenty of food, is there not, Maud?"

Lady Worlington turned her head in their direction. "Of course."

Geoffrey sensed a decided lack of enthusiasm in her manner. Somehow, in the course of the evening last night, he had managed to earn her poor opinion. And poor opinions were not something Geoffrey was used to shouldering—especially where women were concerned. It piqued him a little. Lady Worlington turned away again as if the conversation and its outcome were of little consequence to her.

Geoffrey turned back to Lady Aldine. "In that case, we would be delighted to accept your invitation."

O

"I LOVE TO see young faces around the table," said Lady Aldine, hurrying into the house to tell Cook the new count for dinner.

Lord Aldine handed his cane and beaver to a footman and allowed another footman to assist him in removing his greatcoat. "Then, my dear, you shall be pleased to hear that I have invited Stapleton and Eustace to dinner as well."

Maud and her mother exchanged a glance. "But my dear…."

"Juliana," said Lord Aldine, his tone growing firm as he straightened his back. It sounded as if he were about to admonish a child—and indeed, the comparison was apt, for he was more than old enough to be Lady Aldine's father. "Stapleton is my brother's son."

"Yes, yes," said Lady Aldine in a conciliatory fashion, "it is just

that he can be so…"

"…charming," finished Maud. Her mother needed rescuing, and there was no point in arguing the matter with her father. It would only upset him unnecessarily. "More surprises for Cook, Mama."

Lady Aldine took the hint and made for the kitchen with her news.

"Come, Papa," said Maud, "I shall read to you in the library until dinner is ready." Walking over to her father, she tucked his arm under hers, and moderating her pace to match his, accompanied him to his favorite retreat.

"Now then," she said, reaching for the book on the end table, "Sir Walter Scott?"

"As you wish, my dear," said her father, settling himself into a worn armchair. He took a lap robe and tucked it around himself, even though the fire, lit by a prescient housekeeper, was already burning brightly in this room. It is likely he would just as soon have listened to an agricultural journal or an article on fox hunting. Subject matter, at least in recent years, had become a matter of indifference to him, and reading was now simply a gateway into his favorite activity.

Maud began to read in clear, rhythmic tones: "O young Lochinvar is come out of the west. Through all the wide Border his steed was the best…."

It did not take long for the inevitable to happen. Within a quarter of an hour, Harry Aldine had drifted off in his armchair, his gray head lolling against his chest.

Maud's voice dwindled down to a whisper and stopped altogether as she saw that he was truly asleep. She closed the volume in her hands.

"Oh, please go on," said a voice from the door.

She looked up to see that her reading had another audience than was intended. Lord Tilbury was leaning against the frame of the door, arms folded—present in the library for she knew not how long.

"Your grace!" Maud rose from her chair with a start.

"I beg pardon," said the young man immediately. "I did not mean to startle you. Lady Aldine told me that her husband was in the library, and when I came to find him, I heard Scott being read so melodiously that I did not want to interrupt."

"You enjoy his poetry then?" It had been one of Maud's few solaces in the wilds of Devon—a window from the cell of the life she had chosen.

"Very much," said the duke. He crossed the threshold into the

room and held out his hand for the book. She handed it to him and he began to leaf through the pages. "'And come he slow, or come he fast, it is but death who comes at last.' So many verses of truth and beauty."

"A good line. You must tell me some more of your favorites at dinner," she said, forgetting that she had been annoyed when her mother had invited the Angiers to dine with them. Perhaps their common interest would produce more concordant conversation than their failed attempts on the dance floor. And besides, this puppy would prove a welcome distraction from Cousin Stapleton.

"Maudie!" said an exuberant voice at the door.

"Hush!" she said, remembering her father was asleep. She was barely able to turn around before she was enveloped in a just-as-exuberant embrace. "Oh, it is you Ralph!" She gave him a kiss on the cheek and then remembered her duty as a hostess. "Have you been introduced to his grace, the Duke of Tilbury?"

Ralph pulled away from her in surprise. "Why, yes, I have. Quite recently, in fact."

Lord Tilbury's eyebrows raised as he recognized Maud's half-brother. "And in quite different circumstances."

"Oh?" Maud looked from one man to the other. There was a strange chasm lying between them, not exactly hostility, but a seriousness that she did not understand. "And what circumstances were those?"

Neither man felt called upon to elaborate.

"I can only presume then," said Maud acidly, "that they were the sort of circumstances that gentlemen feel compelled to hide from a lady. I will have you know that I think the less of you both for it."

"Oh, come now, Maudie," said Ralph, putting his arm around her shoulders. "How many months has it been since I've seen you? And you shall not be angry with me right out of the opening gate."

Lord Tilbury was versed enough in social niceties to understand that this was the time for him to take his leave. He bowed to Maud. "I look forward to sharing more verses, Lady Worlington."

As he left the library, Maud followed him over to the door and shut it behind him.

"Verses?" asked Ralph. His broad face looked like he was about to burst into laughter.

"Apparently the duke is a devotee of Sir Walter Scott," replied Maud. She shook an admonishing finger at Ralph. "There are worse

things a boy could be."

Ralph did not miss her descriptor. "You think him quite young then?"

"How could I not?"

"Ah, well, at least he was friendly."

"Strangely, yes," said Maud. "More friendly than he was last night when he was obliged to dance with me."

"Obliged?" Ralph snorted. "I'm sure he was honored. You shine everyone else down, Maudie. Who wouldn't want to dance with you?"

Maud harrumphed and sat down on the sofa, pulling Ralph down beside her. "Oh, Ralph! I've only been back in town two or three days, and I can't help but feeling so…on the shelf."

"Ridiculous," said Ralph. "You may have no husband, but a widow's place in society is far different than a spinster's. You have your independence, you can go where you choose, and believe me when I say you will have your pick of the London dandies, both the puppies and the full-grown hounds. You are just as desirable as you were seven years ago—a rich heiress from a titled family. The fortune hunters will be coming in droves."

This talk of money made Maud uncomfortable, and she quickly changed the subject back to Lord Tilbury. "How have you come across him before? You're not his solicitor, are you?"

"No, no. I had some business with Will," said Ralph vaguely, "and we happened to cross paths."

"Ah, Will," said Maud, beginning to understand the connection. "Can you believe the news? I never thought Will would marry…and certainly not so young."

Ralph clicked his tongue. "It is certainly unexpected. But perhaps it will be the making of him. A good woman can do that."

"Helena seems sweet."

"Very."

"And innocent."

Ralph rose from the sofa without answering. "I think I heard the gong."

Maud stood up as well. "We can talk more later, after the other dinner guests leave. Will you wake Father?"

Ralph walked over to the old man resting so peacefully in the chair. "No, I haven't the heart." He tucked the lap robe more tightly around Lord Aldine and turned his head, ever so gently, to rest more comfortably on the back of the armchair.

Then the two of them headed towards the dining room where the party was assembling for the Christmas feast.

O

"I AM SORRY, my dear, but I could not arrange it any other way," Lady Aldine whispered to Maud as they went in to the dining room. And with that, Maud knew that she would be obliged to sit next to Cousin Stapleton at the dinner. She took a deep breath and steeled herself for the encounter.

"You are looking well, Maud," said Stapleton. "You remind me very much of my dear Dorothea. She would wear that very same color of green at Christmastime." He was staring at her. As he always did. And the fact that they were sitting right next to each other at the table made it even more awkward.

"Thank you," said Maud. She applied herself to cutting a piece of roast pig. "You must enjoy having Eustace home for the holidays."

"Oh, of course, of course," replied Stapleton. "You understand a father's feelings so admirably." He sniffed the wine in his goblet, luxuriating in the smell, and then took a small sip. "Although," he added, "our house is so quiet, especially with dear Dorothea gone, and I think he misses all his lads at Oxford. Don't you, my boy?"

Eustace, the straw-haired, pimple-faced young man seated across the table, grunted noncommittally. He had grown a foot since Maud had seen him last, and now towered over his father physically.

"He's a bit of a rabble-rouser there," said Stapleton, dropping his voice lower and leaning in even further as if he were expressing himself in confidence. Maud had distinct memories of Eustace as an unruly child and had no doubt that Eustace was a pronounced thorn in the flesh of Oxford's respectability. What she could not discern was whether Stapleton was proud of the fact or deplored it.

"Are you an Oxford man?" Lady Aldine asked Lord Tilbury. As the highest-ranking guest at the dinner, he had been seated next to the hostess.

"I am indeed," replied the duke, "although I do not recall running across Will there."

Will disengaged himself from conversation with Helena just long enough to answer with an irreverent, "Lud, no."

Maud squirmed inwardly. She wished Will had a *little* more substance to him. No, he was not an Oxford man, for Oxford involved

books, and as such, it was not something Will had even attempted. He would have had to be chained to a chair before he ever agreed to have Scott's poetry read to him.

Maud saw the duke's eyes glittering as he took a drink of wine from his pewter goblet. Clearly, he regarded Will in a disapproving light. She wondered why he had ever agreed to Will's suit for Helena's hand. Perhaps she had cajoled her brother into it, and he was even now wishing the banns unpublished.

"Your family hails from Kent, I believe?" said Ralph, spearing a seasoned Brussels sprout with his fork and bringing it to his lips as he addressed the duke with a voice of interest.

Maud breathed easier. Ralph could always be trusted to steer the conversation on a safe course. How many times she had wished that he had not been born on the wrong side of the blanket! He would have made an admirable heir to the Aldine line. But as it was, he had been set up in a modest manner with a career as a solicitor, while impetuous and indolent Will received the prospect of inheriting the whole of the Aldine estate and she had received a generous marriage settlement. Fifty thousand pounds to bring to Devon with her for her husband Humboldt.

"Yes, Kent," said the duke. "A little too close to London for comfort sometimes. Nothing at all like the fascinating wilds of Devon where Lady Worlington has been residing." He looked over at her, and his golden eyebrows lifted in invitation.

Maud's eyebrows crinkled into a straight line. Lord Tilbury seemed to be making up for his neglect last night with an overabundance of attention today. Perhaps it was his way of showing gratitude for the assistance she had provided Helena. "I suspect that 'fascinating' might be too strong a word," she replied, "but the moors are exquisite, and if one sketches, the birdlife is plentiful and eager to sit for portraits."

"And do you sketch?" asked Tilbury.

"Of necessity," said Maud. "There is little else to do in Devon."

"I wonder that you did not come home sooner then," said Will. "Hasn't it been all of six months since Old Hum went under?"

Maud's face suffused with color, not so much at the reference to her husband's death as at the impertinence of the question. God knows, she had wanted to come home sooner—seven years sooner would have been preferable.

"Will!" said Lady Aldine, shooting a quelling look at her younger child. "I'm sure Maud had her reasons, not the least of which would

be to spend her time of mourning away from such a muddlehead as you."

Ralph, the dear man, opened his mouth to change the subject yet again, but Stapleton saw no reason to let the conversation depart from Maud. "Whatever reasons they were, I am certain that they were excellent ones. And now, dear Maud, what do you mean to do now that you have returned to London? Was the Worlington town house part of your jointure? Do you mean to live with your parents or find a companion and set up your own establishment?"

Maud's jaw set. She felt besieged at every turn. "With my parents," she said shortly. She had no interest in discussing her jointure in public.

"Your filial spirit does you credit," said Stapleton, lifting his cup to salute her.

Maud choked down a groan of annoyance and forced herself to smile. It was Christmas, after all—the time of peace and goodwill to men. But goodwill was the last thing she was feeling as the dinner dragged on into the late afternoon.

CHAPTER 3

Geoffrey folded his arms behind his head and leaned back in his chair, appetite sated and stomach full. The ladies had retired to the drawing room a few minutes ago, and Ralph Aldine—since Will refused to rise from his chair—was playing the part of host and filling glasses from the liquor cabinet. Geoffrey reached out a long-fingered hand for a glass of brandy and swirled it in the glass before taking a sip.

Ralph seemed a good enough fellow—going on thirty, sensible, cultured. A pity he was only a by-blow—a bastard Aldine had sired before his marriage.

Geoffrey shifted in his chair. Will was an entirely different matter. A spoiled puppy. A selfish child. A wastrel with a commonplace mind. He was never the man Geoffrey would have chosen for his sister…but then, the choice had not been left to him. She would be the future Viscountess Aldine, but would she be loved and cherished as she deserved to be?

"Whist?" queried young Eustace Aldine. He jutted out his lip and huffed upward to remove the blond hair covering his eyes. Will assented readily, and Ralph agreed to join as well.

"A game for young bloods," pronounced Stapleton Aldine, waving a hand filled with jeweled rings. Geoffrey reckoned that the man was about forty years old. He reminded him of nothing more than a well-fed cat, sleek and purring contentedly wherever he pleased. And if dinner was any indicator, Lady Worlington was not fond of felines sitting on her lap.

There was something restive about her, as wild as the moors in Devon she had described. Geoffrey wondered if she had been happy there, if her abruptness was born out of grief at having left the place.

"I beg you to enjoy yourselves without me while I join the ladies." Stapleton Aldine headed for the double doors that led into the drawing room.

"Will you make a fourth, Tilbury?" asked Ralph.

Geoffrey hesitated. He enjoyed a good hand of cards, and they needed two pairs to play, but on the other hand, his curiosity about Lady Worlington—and of course his concern for Helena—tempted him to desert the whist table as well.

At that moment, Lord Aldine walked into the room, looking decidedly more awake than when Geoffrey had last seen him. Ralph Aldine leapt up from his chair at the table and offered it to his father. “Do you mean to play?” asked Will in shock.

“Why not?” said Lord Aldine with a chuckle. His back unstooped a little as he wagged his finger proudly. “I wager that Ralph and I can take down you two young blades without much trouble.” Within moments, the game had commenced with Will and Eustace partnering each other against the older Aldines, and Geoffrey—now without a seat at the whist table—proceeded through the double doors to the drawing room where the ladies were residing.

Lady Aldine and his sister were ensconced in the window seat, speaking excitedly of ribbons, and fabrics, and flowers. The word “wedding” washed over Geoffrey’s ears more than once. It was comforting to see the kindness with which Lady Aldine was treating Helena. But of course, a duke’s daughter with a fortune like Helena’s was a daughter-in-law that anyone would desire.

On the sofa by the fire, Lady Worlington was looking far less animated as her cousin regaled her with tales of young Eustace’s exploits at Oxford.

“Would you believe it, dear Maud,” said Stapleton Aldine, his jeweled hand slapping his thigh, “the dean actually sent him home for a week until I applied some…persuasion to have him readmitted. He enjoys a lark too much, but he is not a bad sort, I’m sure you’ll agree, and as bookish as is good for a man. Why, the other day, he was telling me a story from Chaucer by heart….”

“I hope I do not intrude,” said Geoffrey, lifting his coattails to sit in a horsehair-stuffed chair adjacent to the sofa.

“Not at all, your grace,” said Lady Worlington. She bestowed a small smile on him. It was hard to gauge, but Geoffrey suspected his presence was not unwelcome. It is always a blessing to be rescued from a bore, even if your rescuer is an inattentive partner from a recent ball.

“No whist for you?” asked Stapleton Aldine jovially.

“Not today,” said Geoffrey. “One plays whist any day of the year. Christmas Day demands something more unique.”

“And what would that be?” asked Lady Worlington. Her head, with its pile of brown curls and pearl pins, tilted to the side as she waited for his answer.

“Spillikins.”

“But of course!” She burst into a peal of laughter, a musical little laugh that echoed through the drawing room.

Geoffrey grinned.

“What?” asked Mr. Aldine, his thick fingers drumming on his leg in confusion.

“Spillikins,” repeated Geoffrey. “We always played it on Christmas Day when we were children.”

“But what is spillikins?”

“Good heavens, Stapleton!” said Lady Worlington. “You were a child too long ago.”

The cousin hemmed and hawed at this. He clearly did not care to be considered past the prime of life. “You merely compare me to the overly youthful Lord Tilbury.”

“Indeed,” replied Geoffrey, giving Lady Worlington a wink, “and it was just last week that I was in short coats. A pity I did not think to have my nurse bring my toys.”

“No matter,” said Lady Worlington, rising to her feet. “I believe I still have my set upstairs in my old room. I shall ring for my maid to fetch it and we shall play straightway. Will you join us, Stapleton?”

“I shall watch, my dear Maud, if only for the educational insight. One does like to broaden the mind with new experiences.”

Within moments, the trio was seated at the small tea table, and Lady Worlington was loosening the string on a leather bag full of ivory sticks.

“Shall I cast them, or you?”

“Lady’s prerogative,” said Geoffrey.

She took the ivory pieces up in her hands and tossed them in a jumble on the mahogany tabletop.

“A bit haphazard, my dear Maud,” observed her ponderous and attentive shadow.

“As it should be,” retorted Lady Worlington. Geoffrey could see that her patience was wearing thin with her cousin.

She looked at Geoffrey. “Your move.” Her eyes lit up with challenge.

Geoffrey’s hand moved slowly over the pile, and then, he seized delicately upon an oblong ivory piece and managed to remove it from

the pile without disturbing any of the other sticks.

"Well done, sirrah," said Lady Worlington, her eyes hooded like a hawk's as she watched his movements. The woman was competitive, which left Geoffrey with a difficult dilemma—did a true gentleman try his best or let the lady win?

His fingers fumbled on his next pass over the spillikins, and after moving a piece accidentally, he was forced to cede his turn.

Lady Worlington was cautious and clever and managed to remove five pieces before she disturbed the pile.

"Well done, Maud! Well done!" said Mr. Aldine enthusiastically. "There is a lightness about your touch—a credit to womanliness."

"I see I shall have to better my play," said Geoffrey, rubbing his hands together in preparation. He dislodged six sticks without mishap, but the seventh stick slipped from his grasp.

"What is this? Spillikins?" asked Helena. She had come over from the window with Lady Aldine to observe the game at the table.

"Just so," replied Lady Worlington. She took nine sticks from the pile. Her eyes held a triumphant light as she looked at Geoffrey.

The game moved more evenly then, as they went back and forth with two, three, or four sticks claimed. As Geoffrey prepared to take what might be his final turn, the doors from the dining room opened, and Will entered.

"The card-player emerges!" proclaimed Stapleton. "How now, sir? Done with whist so soon?"

Will yawned. "Indeed. Papa and Ralph destroyed us in two hands." He came up behind Geoffrey and gave a quick look at the pile of ivory sticks each player possessed.

As Geoffrey leaned in to capture his next quarry, the leg of his chair jiggled a little and his hand slipped on the pile with disastrous results.

"Ah, wretched luck!" purred Stapleton, a little too happily while Lady Aldine clucked in sympathy.

Lady Worlington glared at her brother who was standing just by Geoffrey's elbow. "Will!"

Geoffrey's lips set into a line but he said nothing. He would see how this altercation played out between the Aldine siblings.

"You bumped him," asserted the lady.

Will shrugged. "I thought you liked to win, Maud."

"Not that way." Her tone was severe. "And now I shall not win at all. It seems I must forfeit the match, Lord Tilbury." She rose from her

seat.

"I accept the forfeit, but without pleasure," replied Geoffrey, rising as well. It was not the way he liked to win either.

"Well," said Will unrepentantly, "since the spillikins are now available, Helena and I shall play a match." And within seconds, he had filled the chair Geoffrey had vacated and gathered the sticks into a new pile.

Helena giggled as she took her turn, and Will brushed her hand with his as she pulled her winnings back into a smaller pile in front of her. Geoffrey set his teeth. His sister had lost all sense of reason. He wanted nothing more than to revoke the banns that had been read that morning at church—but it was too late now. The words had been spoken, and Helena must go through with this marriage.

The rest of the party drifted back toward the sofa and chairs, and Geoffrey took up a stance before the fire where he could converse with the others but keep close watch on the couple at the table.

O

"IT IS DARK as pitch already," said Lady Aldine, looking over at the curtains which needed to be drawn. Maud's eyes followed her mother's in surprise. Dinner had seemed interminable, but the last half hour had flown by.

"A sign to us that we should depart to our own dwelling," said Lord Tilbury. He looked over at the table and the flirtatious bout of spillikins. "As soon as this match is over, we will make our farewells."

"Oh, but we have not brought out the Christmas pudding yet!" said Lady Aldine. "Surely, you must stay for that."

Lord Tilbury hesitated.

Before she had even thought it through, Maud found herself seconding her mother's pleas. "Yes, surely you must stay for the pudding. What is it that Scott says? 'Heap on more wood! The wind is chill, but let it whistle as it will. We'll keep our Christmas merry still.'"

Lord Tilbury looked at her in surprise, and something about his face softened. He cast a quick look at his sister who was shaking out the spillikins for a second match. "Of course, if it is no intrusion, we would be happy to stay." His eyes lingered on Maud's face. "It is far too merry here to think of leaving."

Maud felt a little flutter of excitement that she, immediately, tried to silence. Had it really been so long since she was in amiable

company that she must be fancying interest lying behind every courtly word? She reminded herself that this fellow was no older than Will, and that served to dampen some of her enthusiasm.

Before long, the other whist players had arrived, having finished their brandy and their masculine conversation. Eustace took Helena's place at the spillikins table, and soon he and Will were engaged in ribald banter as each tried to trip up his opponent. Lady Aldine rose immediately from the green wingback chair and gave it to Lord Aldine, as it was his favorite, and placed herself in a smaller floral-covered chair beside him. Ralph observed Maud and Stapleton sitting on opposite sides of the sofa and inserted himself between them. "Plenty of room for three," he said jovially, as sturdy Stapleton was forced to shrink into the corner. Maud shot Ralph a grateful glance.

After some time, Lady Aldine rang for the Christmas pudding to be brought up, and the butler brought the monstrous dessert out on a platter for all to admire before setting it on the sideboard to serve. The cloth had already been removed, and Maud could see the raisins and candied citrus adorning the sweet dough. She took a few bites of the plate she was served, relishing the sweet fruitiness but too full to eat much.

"We would normally have fresh oranges as well," said Lady Aldine apologetically, "but Cook says they were few and far between at the markets this week. Everyone has been buying them up for Christmas."

"Oh," said Helena, standing behind Will's chair at the table, "you must ask Geoffrey to send some round. He has ever so many."

"I take it you have an orangerie, young man?" the elderly viscount asked Lord Tilbury.

"I do indeed."

Maud's curiosity was piqued. Her mother had some interest in horticulture, but her father had little time for it, and she had never been inside one of the glass rooms that many fashionable families attached to their houses.

"How many trees do you have, your grace?" she asked.

"Six orange trees," he said, with a smile, "and a dozen more of other varieties. It is heated, of course, and quite a pleasant place to sit in the winter months."

"Your father's construction, no doubt," replied Lord Aldine, shaking a wrinkled finger.

"Actually, no. I had it installed two years ago, a few months after his death."

“Most singular,” replied Maud’s father. “I would not have thought a man of your years to care for such things.”

Maud had the same thought. Will certainly did not have the patience to pursue gardening. But then perhaps Ralph would have at that age, if things had been different and if he had not been forced to seek a profession.

Lord Tilbury shifted in his stance and re-clasped his hands behind his back. The light of the fire behind him added a glow to the brown Hessian boots that he wore and cast his face in shade. “You will have to call upon us some day this week and see it for yourself.”

“Possibly, possibly,” said Lord Aldine. He pulled out his pocket watch and looked at it. “I think that right now, however, I shall bid you adieu.” He pushed hard on the arm of his chair to propel himself to his feet. “Good night,” he said to the room, “and a happy Christmas to you all.”

Lady Aldine rose to her feet as well and took her husband’s arm to assist him out of the room. Maud could feel a draft as the double doors of the drawing room opened, allowing her father an early escape to his bed. He had always seemed old to his children, but even so, Maud could see that he had aged considerably in the seven years since she had lived at home. The doctor’s news conveyed in Lady Aldine’s letter from a few months ago had not been encouraging. Maud wondered how much time her father had left. Surely, he would live to see Will married—but to see another Christmas? It was doubtful.

“Now then,” said Lady Aldine, as she turned back around, “how shall we entertain ourselves? For it is still Christmas, and I do not mean to go to bed for hours!”

“Aunt Juliana,” said Eustace, “Will and I have hit upon a capital notion.”

Maud’s mother began to cluck again. “I have heard your capital notions before, Eustace, and I do not know if I like the sound of that. Pray tell, what plan have you hatched?”

Eustace’s voice cracked as he made his announcement. “The time has come to bob for apples.”

A groan went up from Stapleton, but Will and Helena hastened to add their pleas to Eustace’s.

“I can see why you waited until Lord Aldine departed to make this proposal,” said Lady Aldine. She sighed indulgently. “But very well, I can see no harm in it. We are all family tonight, and we may be as

silly as we choose."

Maud breathed in. She was still adjusting to their new connection to the Angiers, and *she* certainly did not consider it to be a cozy familial gathering. She caught Ralph's eye and he shrugged. "I don't intend to do any bobbing, Maudie. Do you?"

"No, indeed," she said, "but I am not opposed to watching Will and Eustace make cakes of themselves."

"How about it, Tilbury?" asked Ralph. "Do you mean to bob?"

The duke's golden eyebrows arched, and his mouth curved up into a mischievous smile, but he did not respond to Ralph's question.

Will rang for the housekeeper and asked for a dozen apples to be sent in along with a pail of water. "Best send for some linens too," said Maud. It had been years since they had celebrated Christmas with apple bobbing, but she was quite certain that in a few short minutes there would be water everywhere.

They placed the bucket in front of the hearth, Lady Aldine speculating that this placement would make the cold water a little warmer before any heads were dipped.

"What? You did not send for heated water, Will?" asked Ralph, mockingly. "Someone shall catch their death of cold." He rose from his seat on the sofa and moved one of the tea table chairs to the side of the sofa, insisting that Helena remove to that spot to have a better view of the proceedings.

Maud gave her new neighbor a sympathetic smile. She could sense that Helena was still embarrassed over her display of weakness last night—Maud longed to whisper in her ear that she had told no one about it and that she was not the first young lady to indulge in too much alcoholic punch at a ball.

Eustace claimed the right, as the youngest, to attempt the feat first. He stripped off his coat and his cravat and knelt in vest and shirtsleeves beside the large wooden bucket. He took a deep breath and reached for an apple, but as his teeth touched it, it rolled from his grasp and his nose dipped into the water. His courage failing him, he pulled back. "Steady there!" cried Will as a burst of laughter filled the room.

"Indeed," said Lord Tilbury. "Faint heart never won fair apple!"

"I'll remember you said that, Tilbury," said Will, as he prodded Eustace with his foot.

Eustace gathered his courage and finally took the chilly plunge to chase an apple down to where he could retrieve it. Maud discovered

that she and everyone about her were holding their breath as Eustace held his, submerged beneath the water. Five seconds passed. Then five more. And then Eustace's dripping head reappeared, spluttering and snorting but with nothing resembling an apple between his jaws.

"Are you sure these apples are the right size?" he asked.

"Course they are!" said Will. His own jacket was too tight to shrug out of himself, and Ralph came over from the sideboard to assist him as he disrobed. Will untied his cravat with one pull and tossed it to Helena. She gave a little squeak as she caught it, and her face turned a dark shade of pink. The room began to laugh as Will struggled to unbutton his waistcoat, but from the corner of her eye, Maud could see Lord Tilbury take the cravat from Helena and ball it up in his fist. The man was strait-laced, at least where his sister was concerned.

At last, Will, in only his shirtsleeves, knelt before the bucket, and seizing upon an apple, dunked his head all the way into the bucket. Three seconds later, he emerged triumphant, looking like the Christmas boar with a great red ball hanging from his mouth.

"A lucky bite, a lucky bite," said Stapleton, offering a consoling pat to Eustace.

"The victor!" said Ralph, taking Will's arm and raising it in the air.

"Pish," said Will, removing the apple from his teeth as water streamed down his chest. "No competition in that. Come on, Tilbury. Will you take your turn, or must we brand you a coward?"

Lord Tilbury's eyes glittered dangerously. In the firelight, Maud could see the sharp angles of his cheekbones, and once again, all traces of geniality had disappeared from his face.

"Will," said Ralph firmly. "I hardly think one would ever characterize Lord Tilbury a coward, regardless of whether he chooses to bob for apples."

"Indeed," said Lady Aldine, "there is no need to force such a barbaric custom upon our guests—Lord Tilbury, we respect your wish to be excused."

"On the contrary," said Lord Tilbury, dropping Will's crumpled cravat onto the floor. He walked around the sofa to the center of the room. "I would be delighted to participate. If you please, sir," he said, presenting his shoulders to Ralph and receiving assistance with removing his own jacket. He was far less ostentatious than Will had been about disrobing, but Maud still felt a wave of heat come over her face when his cravat disappeared leaving an open shirt front.

"And now then," he said, kneeling down. He took a deep breath,

opened his mouth, and then his golden hair disappeared beneath the water.

Maud counted to twenty inside her head, and still he did not resurface. Except for the sounds of the sloshing water, the room was as silent as an empty church. “Tut, tut, a regular pearl diver,” said Stapleton, pocket-watch in hand. “Thirty seconds, by my count.”

At that instant, Lord Tilbury’s broad shoulders lifted, and his face resurfaced bearing an apple so large that he had barely been able to get his teeth into it. “A gift,” he said, taking it from his mouth and tossing it to Will.

Ralph handed Lord Tilbury a cloth, and he wiped his face with it, half of the water dripping down his neck and dampening his shirtfront. He shook his golden head like a hound, spraying water all over his sister until she shrieked at him and batted him away from her. Will turned the apple over in his hands and then tossed it back with a mild glare of ill humor.

“What happens now?” asked Maud, unsure of the rules for this sort of match.

“We go again,” said Will, curtly, “until one of us fails in the quest.”

“But first, I shall redeem myself,” said Eustace, wiping his nose on his damp sleeve, and before anyone could say otherwise, he knelt and lowered his head into the bucket. Apparently, Lord Tilbury’s long sojourn in the depths inspired him, for he also spent some time scouring the bottom of the bucket for a prize.

Will shook his head at his younger cousin’s determination. Still piqued by his loss to Lord Tilbury, he walked up behind Eustace, leaned down, and pushed his head lower into the bucket. Eustace began to struggle and kick with the terror of a man about to drown.

The room dissolved into an uproar. “Will!” shrieked Lady Aldine and Lady Helena in chorus. Maud kept to her seat incredulously while Stapleton rose from his own with energy hitherto unseen and yanked Will off of Eustace.

“What the devil!” demanded Eustace, coughing and spluttering. He shoved Will hard and sent him hurtling toward the fireplace screen where Lord Tilbury caught him with a steadying arm.

“It was only a lark,” said Will, acting bewildered why anyone would take offense.

“Only a lark?” repeated Stapleton, his usual smoothness dissolving into rage. “Now see here, young William—”

Ralph came round and put a mollifying arm around Stapleton’s

shoulders. “A foolish prank to be sure, but I think we can all agree that it is time for some Christmas spirits.” He gestured toward the dining room where the liquor cabinet stood. “Stapleton, will you help me pour?”

CHAPTER 4

Geoffrey reached for another glass. It was half an hour to midnight now, and Lady Aldine had begged them all to keep her company until the clock struck twelve. The evening had grown remarkably rosier ever since Ralph Aldine had begun to pour the brandy liberally. Geoffrey was beginning to feel a warm glow all over and an indulgent attitude toward all his hosts, even to scapegrace Will Aldine.

After ruining the last game, Will had suggested a game of snapdragon. They had thrown a cup of raisins into a large shallow bowl of brandy and were waiting for them to soak up some of the spirits. After a quarter of an hour, Ralph tested the concoction by fishing out a raisin and tossing it into his mouth. “The preparations are complete!” he announced. Then, he moved the table on which they had played spillikins to the center of the room, and most everyone found a seat on either the sofa or the armchairs.

“And now,” declared Eustace, who had recovered from the insult of the water dunking enough to embrace Will’s newest plan, “we blow out the candles.”

“Oh, my dears!” said Lady Aldine, indulgent to a point but also sensitive to the dictates of propriety. “Do you think that is wise?”

But the remonstrance came too late. Gangly Eustace was already charging about the room snuffing wicks, and soon the only light in the drawing room came from the flickering fire of the giant Yule log. Geoffrey moved out of the way of the fire to give the company more light and took up his position behind the sofa where Lady Worlington was still seated. In the crush, her cousin Stapleton had moved nearer to her on the sofa, and Geoffrey could see his thick leg pressed up against Lady Worlington’s skirt.

Will lit a tiny piece of kindling in the fire and brought it towards the bowl. “Behold!” he shouted as he dropped it in. A giant fireball came out of the spirits, and they began to burn with a clear, bright light while the sweet and acrid smell of flaming alcohol filled the room.

“And now what?” asked Helena wide-eyed, as the tower of fire decreased to a short flame. They had never played parlor games like these at home.

“And now we enjoy our raisins!” said Ralph. He reached a hand out towards the bowl and, quick as a cat, grabbed one of the flaming raisins and popped it into his mouth.

“Bravo!” said Helena in admiration, clapping her hands.

Will, not to be outdone, seized one raisin, devoured it, and then nabbed another.

Geoffrey leaned down and spoke in a low voice in Lady Worlington’s ear. “This is one game of spillikins at which you would most certainly lose.” He could smell the rose water perfume on her neck, and the pearls in her hair glinted in the firelight.

“Try me,” she replied, without turning her head.

Geoffrey skirted the sofa to stand beside the snapdragon bowl, and Lady Worlington rose to meet him on the other side. “Gentlemen first,” she said archly.

“As you wish,” said Geoffrey, looking around for a suitable place to set down his brandy glass. She took it from him without a word, and he rolled back his cuffs to make sure no sparks singed them.

His first endeavor was quite successful—one raisin gained with no ill consequences. The fruit felt hotter on his tongue than it had on his hands.

Lady Worlington was even quicker still, her hand striking like a cobra into the bowl and drawing back with the prize in its fangs. He should have known that with a brother like Will she would have played this game before. “Do you retract your statement, Lord Tilbury?”

“Certainly not,” said Geoffrey. He reached for his glass of brandy, his fingers brushing hers as she handed it to him. He took a large sip. “I shall increase the difficulty. Two raisins, my lady.”

“Two?” objected Ralph. “I’ve never seen such a thing. You’ll burn yourself for sure. Maudie, don’t try it.”

“I will not have to, unless Lord Tilbury succeeds at it,” replied Lady Worlington. She offered to hold the glass again, but Geoffrey shook his head and downed the rest of the contents before placing it in his left hand. Poised and confident, he reached into the bowl, snatched up two raisins, and dropped them into his brandy glass.

But the split-second that it took to gather up two of the flaming raisins was a split-second too much. He schooled his face to hide the

pain that the searing flames had inflicted on him, but Lady Worlington was perceptive….

O

"YOU'VE BURNT YOUR fingers!" said Maud.

"It's no matter." Lord Tilbury grimaced.

"It will be tomorrow if you do not put some butter on it. Come," she said briskly. "I'll have a servant take you down to the larder."

The clock struck twelve as they left the drawing room and went out into the hall, and it was only then that Maud realized just how late it was. There were no footmen present to take Lord Tilbury down to the kitchen, and so Maud—without thinking clearly—decided to take him down herself. As they went down the servants' stairs, Maud saw that several of the candles in the sconces had burnt down to the holder and gone out, and the servants, most of them now abed, had not bothered to replace them. The light was as soft as moonlight and just as mysterious. She felt the closeness of Lord Tilbury's presence, treading behind her on the stairs. Her stomach tightened, and she began to hurry.

"Slow down," said the duke as they went around a bend in the stairs. "You're like to break your neck hurtling down these stairs in the dark, and I don't know this house like you do."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Maud, halting so suddenly at the foot of the stairs that Lord Tilbury almost ran into her.

He steadied himself against the wall and began to laugh, a laugh as golden as his hair and just as bright. Maud, despite her misgivings, could not resist smiling. "Sh!" she warned him, as he tottered again, and placed a steadying hand against his arm. It would do neither of them good if the butler or housekeeper came out with a nightcap and candle.

"What have we here?" Lord Tilbury asked, squinting up at the greenery and decorations that the servants had festooned their quarters with. At that moment, Maud remembered Perkins' warning from that morning, but her recollection came one moment too late. The duke reached for her arm and pulled her towards him until they were both standing under the mistletoe. Then, bending his neck, he leaned down to give her a kiss.

Maud froze as his lips descended on hers. If she had remained frozen, it is certain that nothing more would have happened. But at

the touch of his lips, her entire body caught fire like a stack of dry kindling. Her lips parted slightly as she kissed him back.

He kissed her harder then, passionately, insistently, and her heart began to pound like an infantry drum. Her hand ran up his shoulder and behind his neck, pulling his face toward hers. His curly golden hair was still a little damp from the dunking in the apple bucket, and she ran her fingers through it.

His hands went around her waist, then, hungrily, his lips left hers and began to shower kisses on her cheek, her ear, her neck….

Something inside Maud whispered a warning, and she pulled away from the embrace. "No," she said, breathing quickly. "No."

Lord Tilbury's hands immediately left her, and he backed away. She could see the chest of his dinner jacket rising and falling as he recovered his own breath. "Lady Worlington," he said, a note of anguish in his voice. "I beg your pardon. I'm afraid I must be foxed. I beg your pardon a thousand times. I am mortified."

"As am I," said Maud, for she knew that the fault lay as much with her as it did with him. Her breath was as ragged as Eustace's after his dunking, and she could not stop her whole body from trembling. "I am sorry…I must leave you now or more things will be burnt tonight than just your fingers. The larder is through there"—she gestured to the door—"and the butter is in the crock."

She turned to flee back up the stairs.

"Thank you. And allow me to beg your pardon again," said Lord Tilbury. "Wine is a mocker says the Preacher, and so is brandy. I shall never drink again."

"Yes, well, best not to make promises you won't be able to keep," said Maud sharply. "Good night, Lord Tilbury."

She lifted the hem of her green dress and darted up the stairs as quickly as she could, trying to will her face into some semblance of composure before she would rejoin the others. He was right—he had been foxed. He had given her the kiss she had waited for and never received in seven long years of marriage. And now that he had been shocked into sobriety, he wholeheartedly regretted doing so.

O

BY THE TIME Geoffrey returned to the party, he discovered that the game had broken up. Lady Aldine was bidding goodnight to her nephew and young Eustace in the entrance hall while Will was

helping Helena on with her furs.

Geoffrey retrieved his beaver and coat and began to put on his gloves. It would be a cold carriage ride home, but the cold air was exactly what he needed to cool the fire that was coursing through his veins.

The Aldine cousins departed through the door, and it was the Angiers' turn to make their farewells. "I thank you for your hospitality," said Geoffrey, kissing Lady Aldine's hand. Beneath his glove, his own hand throbbed a little from the burn. "And you must convey my thanks to Lady Worlington as well." As much as he was afraid to encounter Maud again, he was concerned to see that she was not present with the others.

"She has retired for the evening," said Ralph. Geoffrey could not tell if there was a note of censure in his voice—did he know what had just transpired? But no, it was only a statement of fact.

The groom was already walking their horses outside, and Geoffrey gave Helena his arm to escort her down the stairs and out to their conveyance. "Well, are you happy?" he demanded of Helena, as they seated themselves in the carriage, sharing one bench for warmth.

"Very," she said, her face shuddering at the bitter cold. "And you can forgo all your lecturing, for you seemed happy enough too." She glanced over at him slyly. "Lady Worlington is very pleasant company, is she not?"

At those words, Geoffrey thought his heart would escape from his chest. "I don't know what you intend by that," he growled, terrified that his behavior had been so transparent.

"Why must you be so harsh? I simply meant that you were gay in her company, which is more than you have been at any time in the last two weeks." Helena sniffed, and Geoffrey became afraid that she was about to cry.

The horses' hooves beat a rapid tempo on the streets as the coachman urged them homeward. Geoffrey stared into the black distance of the curtained carriage.

"I am sorry my mood has been abrupt, but you will grant that there has been nothing in the last two weeks for me to be gay about. I have failed miserably in my duties. I have not taken care of you as I ought." He refrained from mentioning that he had also just attempted the seduction of a woman of quality in a stairwell—perhaps the worst of the black marks against him since it was a sin of commission not a sin of omission. "God forgive me!"

“Oh, Geoffrey! Things may not have turned out as planned. But I am marrying Will. And he loves me, and I love him. Why can you not simply be happy for that?”

Geoffrey sighed. Why? He could not tell her why—that was part of the bargain. But as he looked at her pleading face, his heart softened a little. Whatever had transpired, she was still an innocent about the ways of the world, and he reminded himself that the reason he bore the weight he did was so that she would not have to carry it. He reached inside her fur muff with his uninjured fingers and took her hand in his. “I am sorry, Helena. I will try.”

Helena squeezed his hand and they lapsed into silence.

Geoffrey leaned against the carriage wall and sighed again. He could still imagine Lady Worlington’s lips warm against his and the way she had responded, pulling him closer, caressing his shoulder. And then, the look of fright in her face when she had come to her senses and rebuffed him. He had pleaded drunkenness as an excuse, but it was a shallow one at best. He had drunk four glasses of brandy countless times before without any temptation to accost his hostess. No, he had not kissed Lady Worlington because he was foxed. He had kissed Lady Worlington because he wanted her.

The Second Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 5

The next morning, several packages arrived from the Angiers household. The first was addressed to Lady Aldine, and when she opened the brown paper, the powerful scent of oranges wafted toward her. “Maud, why look here! Lord Tilbury has sent us a dozen oranges from his orangerie, and very fine ones they are—large and plump and so delectable-looking. And this other package—why, Maud, it is addressed to you!”

Maud took the second box and cut the string with a penknife that lay on the table. She reached inside, and there, wrapped round with some gauzy golden fabric, she found something heavy and prickly and oblong. She removed the fabric and discovered the largest pineapple that she had ever set eyes on.

“Good heavens! What is that thing?” remarked Ralph who was just entering the room. After their late evening, he had spent the night in his old room and was just coming downstairs to breakfast before heading to his own lodgings and then his office.

“Lord Tilbury has sent round a pineapple for Maud!” said Lady Aldine, gingerly feeling the sharp leaves and knobby skin of the novelty. “He must have quite the accomplished gardener to produce a pineapple of this quality.”

Ralph came over to examine the fruit and hefted it into the air. “I would put the weight at seven or eight pounds.”

“Is that a great deal?” asked Maud.

“Let me put it this way,” said Ralph with a grin. “It is the Prince George of pineapples.”

“We must show it to Cook,” said Lady Aldine, taking the fruit in her hands reverently, both to respect its exalted status and to protect her hands from the sharp-edged leaves.

Ralph and Maud made their way to the dining room where a collation of cold ham and other leftovers from last night had been set out on the sideboard. “No eggs?” he said in disappointment.

“It’s the day after Christmas,” Maud reminded him. “The servants

all have it off, and we're lucky Cook took it upon herself to send up *anything*." She sat down at the table, no appetite for anything after the feasting that had occurred yesterday and the sleepless night which had followed.

"Ah," said Ralph, filling a plate, "and they'll be wanting their presents. I'm certain your mother has that well in hand."

It was always a little awkward, the reminder that although Ralph had grown up in the same nursery as Maud, her mother was not his mother—the reminder that while Will might sleep the day away after a late-night carousing, Ralph would be off to the office to draft wills, take depositions, and advise on investments.

"And speaking of presents, Maudie," said Ralph, seated now and in between mouthfuls, "that was a very generous gift from Tilbury. Were you expecting anything of the kind?"

Maud colored. "Of course not. Why would I be? I told you he was quite inattentive to me at the engagement ball."

Perhaps the pineapple was an apology—although not for what had happened at the ball….

"And quite the opposite last night," said Ralph. He laid down his fork and knife. "Maudie, did something happen between the two of you? You seemed out of sorts when you returned to the drawing room."

Maud groaned. "Yes, but I don't want to tell you about it. It was… oh, it was nothing."

Ralph sat silently for a moment. "Very well." He lifted his fork again. "I mentioned yesterday the advantages that a widow has over a spinster, but I neglected to mention the disadvantages. I don't wish to be a bore, but should you like to hear them?"

"It seems you wish to tell them to me."

"Indeed, I do," said Ralph with a grin, "and it is ever so kind of you to allow me my morning pontification." He cleared his throat. "While a widow may enjoy her independence, it is also that independence that leaves her unprotected. Men feel free to take liberties with a widow, to flirt with her in a way they would not attempt with a doe-eyed debutante. An ace of spades, supposedly, understands the 'rules of the game.'"

"And what rules are those?"

"How to conduct a liaison discreetly."

"Are you saying that Tilbury is attempting a liaison with me?" A wave of guilt came over Maud. What was it that Victor had said about

her—that her looseness could tempt any honest man to sin? She shuddered. No—she would not let that poison infect her mind. She had done nothing immodest to make Tilbury kiss her.

"I will not go that far. But I noted how taken with you he was last night. I merely say to be watchful how far you let him into your affections. He may find you an easy mark—but then again, perhaps I have misjudged him. Perhaps he is on the lookout for a wife."

Maud slapped the table with an open palm. "Ralph, that is ridiculous. He is…far too young for me." She almost said, "barely a man," but the strong arms that had held her next to the stairs last night were as virile as any she had ever felt. "My last marriage was an unmitigated mistake, in large part due to the disparity of our ages. Why would I make the same mistake again?"

Ralph laughed. "Maudie! Your last husband was forty years your senior. How many years separate you and Tilbury? Five? Six?"

"Nevertheless," said Maud severely, "I am certain that a younger man would grow tired of me." *The way I did of Humboldt*. "I will not be unequally yoked."

"Well, this is a change," said Ralph. "The last time we spoke on your marriage, you refused to hear me out."

Maud's face reddened. "I was a fool," she whispered. A lone tear streaked down her cheek. "But you were the only one advising caution, Ralph! Father was for it. And so was Mother. It was my most eligible offer after my season, and so I took it. Father and Mother had a December-May marriage, and they have been happy enough together."

"But you did not love him!"

"I had never been in love before—I assumed it would come later."

"And it did not…."

"No. I don't think Hum ever intended it to be that sort of marriage. He wanted a companion, someone that could dress up like a doll and sit at the foot of the table for dinners. His first wife was his great love match. He did not need another one."

"And then you bore no children, which would have been a comfort."

Maud began to cry harder. "To be fair, I was barely given a chance to do so."

Ralph moved over into the chair adjacent to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "God's wounds, Maudie—why didn't you tell me how miserable you were? On your visit to town every year, you

never said a word."

"What was I to say? That I was dying of loneliness and persecuted at every turn. One does not say such things—one simply endures."

"Persecuted? Sir Humboldt sounds viler with each successive sentence." He removed his handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Maud to wipe her face.

"Oh, it was not Hum—he was kind to me, in his way." She swallowed hard. "Do you remember Victor Worlington?"

"I do indeed—yet another reason why I was opposed to the match."

"I did not think that it would matter that Hum already had a child. It did not matter to Mother that Father had you."

"Yes, Maudie, but the analogy is imperfect. I was two years old when Father married. Victor Worlington was nearly twenty. Older than you even. He could not help but resent you as a replacement for his mother—or do I misread the situation? Was it even worse than that?"

Maud began to breathe rapidly as the memories she had tried to stifle came rushing back to the surface. "Far, far worse. His resentment was so strong that he tried to make his father hate me as well—the lies that he would tell to Hum about me! I could not even greet the vicar at church without Victor accusing me of some sort of indecency. But Ralph!" A note of panic filled Maud's voice. "You must not breathe a word of this to anyone. He has sworn to come to town and spread rumors far and wide—to ruin me if I so much as tell a soul."

"I am discreet," said Ralph, and Maud knew it was true. "But listen, dear heart,"—he took Maud's hands in his—"why did you not return to us right away after your husband died? What kept you in Devon for six more months?"

At that question, Maud discovered that the handkerchief she was holding was becoming increasingly inadequate for the situation at hand. "Oh, Ralph, I—"

At that moment, the butler appeared at the door of the dining room and announced Lord Tilbury's arrival.

"Not now," said Ralph firmly, waving his hand at the butler. But Tilbury, it seems, had not stood on ceremony and claimed a family member's prerogative to trail after the butler and enter directly.

Maud looked up in shock to see that the duke had come upon them while she was in visible distress. She crumpled the handkerchief in her hands and stared blindly.

The duke bowed and then, looking up, caught sight of her face. "Oh, I beg your pardon—I did not mean to intrude…."

O

GEOFFREY HAD SLEPT fitfully all night, consumed with guilt and regret over the encounter under the mistletoe and equally and shamefully consumed with the desire to kiss Maud Worlington again. He rose early and, throwing a loose robe on over his shirt and breeches, went down to his orangerie as was his custom to write in his journal and begin his day. Max, his gardener, was awake as well, and Geoffrey instructed him to pack up twelve oranges and the pineapple for delivery to the Aldines in Grosvenor Square.

"*And* the pineapple, your grace?" Max asked incredulously. It was the finest they had ever grown, and the gardener was adamant that it ought to be enjoyed by the duke and Lady Helena.

But the duke was adamant as well and so the pineapple was wrapped and sent. And following that, Geoffrey had been left with only his guilty conscience and a blank journal page on which the events of last night seemed impossible to record. What sort of entry would it be anyway?

> *Christmas day. Church at Westminster. Dined at Viscount Aldine's in Grosvenor Square. Kissed Lady Worlington. Enjoyed it immensely.*

Impossible! He put down his pen and paced the orangerie, reflecting that the pineapple must have arrived by now. He imagined Lady Worlington's surprise upon receiving it. It was an apology, yes, but would she realize as much? Perhaps he needed to be more direct. He sat down to his journal and copied out the apology that propriety dictated—a practice before the coming performance. His burnt fingers throbbed painfully as he forced them to hold the pen.

He read the letter over, making corrections until he was sufficiently pleased with his own eloquence. He practiced it once beneath his breath, too circumspect to declaim loudly on such a sensitive subject where someone—to wit, Helena—might enter and overhear him.

The idea of Helena knowing what had transpired last night was an appalling prospect. She was already mulish enough, and he shuddered to think how she would bridle at his authority should last night's

events become known. He closed the journal carefully and returned to his room.

With the assistance of his valet, the duke was soon dressed in a black jacket, sky blue waistcoat, and a pair of tight-fitting pantaloons. At ten o'clock, he ordered his horse to be brought round, and within minutes he was on his way to the Aldines' home.

It had seemed natural to follow straight behind the butler to the dining room—after all, the Aldines had stood on no ceremony last night—but as soon as Geoffrey entered the room, he saw that he had made a lamentable error. Lady Worlington was well on her way to becoming a watering pot. It was beyond doubt that he was the cause of her tears. At this sight, his carefully crafted speech took wings and flew away unspoken. He had entered the house meaning to apologize and be done with it, but now it looked like the situation was far worse than he feared.

"Good morning, your grace," said Ralph. "Won't you sit down?"

It was a far politer greeting than Geoffrey expected—or deserved.

"Dreadfully sorry to intrude," Geoffrey repeated. He took a seat. Lady Worlington looked pointedly in the other direction, out the window that overlooked the street below. She had no intention of making this easy for him. Very well then—he did not deserve any favors.

"What brings you here on this cold morning?" asked Ralph, using a solicitor's knife to cut straight to the point.

"Ah," said Geoffrey, momentarily flummoxed as to what he should reply. A stolen kiss was not something one generally discussed in front of the lady's brother—especially given the nature of the two men's last private conversation. "I came to make certain the pineapple arrived safely."

Lady Worlington still would not reply. Geoffrey could see her biting her lip—a lovely pink lip that he had had the pleasure of tasting just last evening. He felt a warmth permeate his limbs all the way down to his core. Angry at himself, he tried to dispel the sensation.

"It did indeed," said Ralph. "I believe I could hear Cook's surprise all the way from the kitchen. A noble fruit."

Lady Worlington recovered herself enough to give a perfunctory reply. "It was very kind of you to send it. I'm sure we are all grateful." She looked away again.

Geoffrey paused. He had clearly addressed the pineapple parcel to Lady Worlington, but she seemed eager to pretend that it was for the

whole of the Aldine family. Very well, let her pretend. He must find some way to speak to her alone, without her brother present.

"I also wished to extend an invitation to come to tea today and tour my orangerie. I thought it might prove diverting." He gave Lady Worlington an encouraging smile. "And Lord and Lady Aldine, of course."

"How kind of you to deliver the invitation in person!" said Ralph. Geoffrey could not tell if his comment was good-humored or sardonic. "Surely a card would have sufficed."

"Indeed," said Geoffrey, "but I was close by and thought I would stop in. You're welcome to come too, Aldine, of course."

"I wish I could, but I have clients pressing appointments on me all this week. There's nothing like the approach of a new year to remind a man that his will needs drafting." Ralph rose from the table. "Come, I'll walk you to the door."

Geoffrey could tell that he was being dismissed—in the deferential way that a baseborn solicitor dismisses a landed aristocrat. He was being denied his interview with Lady Worlington.

The lady stood up from the table too and walked over to the window, offering not so much as a farewell. It was an unwelcome change from her demeanor last night. Their shared appreciation of Scott, the competitive game of spillikins, her sweet-natured concern for his injured hand—all of these had been destroyed by what had come after. Geoffrey cursed himself inwardly. He had been too hasty, too precipitate, and now she was bolting for the hedges like a frightened doe.

The dining room door closed, a visible barrier reminding him of the invisible wall that had sprung up between them. Geoffrey soon found himself in the entrance hall moving toward the front door, the heels of his Hessians ringing loudly on the marble floor.

"How does your sister?" asked Ralph, no doubt attempting to maintain the fiction of pleasantries.

"Well enough," said Geoffrey shortly. "Which is to say, she still thinks the world begins and ends with Will."

"As she should," said Ralph, clapping Geoffrey on the shoulder. He looked at him earnestly. "Make no mistake about it, man. You are doing the right thing."

Geoffrey grimaced. He retrieved his beaver and frock coat from a helpful footman, and then waited a moment for the footman to disappear from earshot. "I hope so—but I cannot help but feel that

Helena is the losing party either way."

"Have a little faith in him," said Ralph. "He will come about and find his moorings."

"God willing," said Geoffrey.

He opened the front door to decamp to his cold carriage. His apology had been forestalled, but at least he had the hope of delivering it later that afternoon.

CHAPTER 6

Lady Aldine received the news of the invitation to the orangerie with considerably more enthusiasm than Maud. “We must send a card round and accept immediately.”

Maud swallowed hard. She had taken Ralph’s warning to heart. Geoffrey Angiers was trying to make a conquest of her. And while other widows might envy her the attentions of this tall, blond Adonis, she was not looking for a connection of this kind. Her cheeks reddened at the thought of the abuse Victor Worlington would heap on her should he ever hear what had transpired last night.

Ralph did say that Tilbury’s attentions might be honorable—but would that not make things even worse? An unequal marriage interested her even less than a brief flirtation. No, she must be on the lookout for a sensible man of character, thirty years old or so, someone she could grow old with together, not separately. Maturity—but not over-maturity—was the thing for her, not some young pup just barely come into his majority. She must be polite to Tilbury for Will and Helena’s sake, but from now on, she would keep her distance.

She went upstairs to put on a dress suitable for making calls, only to find that her maid Perkins had already laid one out on the Roman couch at the foot of the bed. “Oh no, not that one,” said Maud immediately.

“But why not, my lady? Are you not visiting an orangerie? This orange dress with the white net is just the thing.”

“I was thinking something less bold—a sprigged muslin.”

“My lady,” said Perkins severely. “You’ve said it yourself—a sprigged muslin is as dull as Devon. I thought this dress to be one of your favorites.”

“Yes,” said Maud, “but it is very low-cut, especially for daytime.”

“An’ where’s the harm in that?” said Perkins with a wink. “Won’t his grace be there for tea?”

Coming on the heels of Ralph’s warning and Maud’s own determination to keep Tilbury at arm’s length, the maid’s comment

was far too saucy to be appreciated. “Perkins!” said Maud sternly. “I’ll thank you to keep such scandalous talk to yourself.”

“Oh,” said Perkins, a hurt look coming into the young woman’s blue eyes, “I beg your pardon, your ladyship.” She seized the dress from the couch and made to return it to the wardrobe.

Maud was instantly overwhelmed with a wave of guilt. Whatever emotions she was feeling, it was unworthy to speak sharply to a servant. “Stay, Perkins. I spoke too hastily. You are right, as usual. The orange dress would be an apt compliment to the orangerie. I shall wear it.”

A smile lit up Perkins’ face. “Yes, my lady.” She helped Maud undress all the way down to her chemise and then fastened the new dress onto her. The slim skirt required little in the way of petticoats as it hugged her hips and legs. “Never fear,” said Perkins brightly. “We can add some lace we can, if’n you’re wanting to lift the eye away from your bosoms.”

A wave of heat came over Maud’s face as she imagined a certain gentleman’s eyes on her. “Yes, I think some lace would be for the best.”

O

GEOFFREY SAT DOWN, panting heavily. His shirt lay wet against his chest, and his pantaloons stuck to his skin. He had just had his turn against Angelo, and though he had been bested, as expected, it had taken several minutes of dueling before the fencing master’s small sword had pierced his defenses. The crowd in Angelo’s Bond Street school finished applauding Geoffrey’s efforts and turned to watch the next match.

“What is it you English say? Good show, Tilbury,” said the Marquis de Montesquerrat. The sturdy Frenchman saluted Geoffrey, and Geoffrey’s mouth fell into a wide grin.

Montesquerrat took a seat near Geoffrey. “Soon the student becomes the master, eh?”

“Such an eventuality seems remote,” said Geoffrey, but even as he waved away the praise, he felt a prickle of pride.

The marquis leaned in confidentially. “*Eh bien*, I hear you have been putting your fencing skills to use, other than to give Monsieur Angelo his exercise.” His thick eyebrows raised in question.

Geoffrey’s shoulders tensed at this, but he forced them into a

shrug. “You listen to too many rumors, my lord.” In the excitement of the fencing bout, he had forgotten about the burn on his hand, but now that his heart had ceased pumping so vigorously, his hand had begun to throb once more.

Montesquerrat tapped his nose. “I smell a story here, but I will not press.” He looked around at the spectators lining the walls of the gymnasium, and the pair of Corinthians now practicing their skills in the center of the room. “At least, not here in public, *mon ami*. Come, will you have coffee with me at my club?”

“The Society of Eccentrics?” Geoffrey laughed. “I wish I could, but I have callers for tea today.”

“Ah,” said the marquis. He tapped his nose again. “*Des mademoiselles* by the sound of it.”

“You are perceptive.” Geoffrey rose to his feet and reached for the waistcoat and jacket he had removed. He fastened the buttons gingerly over his wet shirt. “And I think a bath is in order first, or they’ll not be calling on me again.”

His bath was already being drawn when he returned home. His valet, Philips, knew his daily routine well and kept a sharp eye out for the carriage on days he knew the duke would be at fencing practice. A ringing bell to the kitchen brought the steaming water upstairs, and by the time Geoffrey was easing out of his coat, all things were ready. Having endured the December chill in a wet shirt all the way from Bond Street to Oxford Street, Geoffrey sank down blissfully into the steaming water of the tub.

The hour of exercise at Angelo’s had kept last night’s escapade from rehearsing itself in his mind, but now that his body was not otherwise occupied, Lady Worlington’s face and figure returned to his thoughts. He had visited this morning intending to apologize, but her obvious distress betokened that something more might be needed.

He thought back over what had happened. Had he compromised her reputation? Possibly—although if she did not speak of it and he did not, no one would ever know of the matter. Was it incumbent upon him to make her an offer? He rolled his head back and forth in the water, relaxing the taut muscles in his neck. Not necessarily—but then, if the matter became known, he could be faulted for his delay to make things right.

“The gray worsted, your grace?” asked Philips, his practical concerns interrupting the duke’s reverie.

“Mmmm…no,” said Geoffrey. “The powder blue jacket. And the

peach brocade waistcoat."

Philips' eyebrows lifted. Had he not been the perfect manservant, he might have commented on the duke's apparent desire to impress his tea guests. In general, Lord Tilbury was far more a Corinthian than a dandy, but he could still dress in the pink of fashion when he wished. "Very good, your grace," was all Philips said. He removed the necessary items from the wardrobe.

Geoffrey sat up straight in the tub. Last night had been a mistake —but he would take full responsibility for his actions. He would make things right. The memory of the kiss came back to him in full force. Though an unplanned engagement might be undesirable at this juncture, there were certainly some consolations to the prospect of matrimony with Lady Worlington.

O

"WHICH TREE DID the pineapple come from?" asked Lady Aldine, gazing up into the leaves of the orange trees in the airy glass house. Maud could count three dozen or more oranges on the branches close to her. The exotic smell filled the room with freshness.

"Over here," said Lord Tilbury, gesturing to a thick, stubby trunk that barely came up to his waist. Two dozen broad leaves guarded the trunk like swords, and on the top of the curiosity, was a star of leaves which looked like it had been recently disturbed.

"But there are no pineapples on it?" asked Lady Aldine, perplexed.

"No, indeed," said the duke. "The pineapple plant grows only one fruit at a time, and now that its prize has been taken, it must send out a shoot before it can grow another."

One pineapple at a time? Maud stared at the plant, finally beginning to understand the full value of the gift she had received that morning. "And is this your only pineapple tree, Lord Tilbury?"

"I am cultivating three more at present," he replied, gesturing to three large pots containing small replicas of the mother tree. "This one is almost ready to flower, and then a few months more will see another fruit."

The enthusiasm on his face was charming and unusual for a young buck of his age. Maud's eyes flicked over his light blue coat and buff trousers. She could not imagine such a man dirtying his hands in potting soil. And yet, he spoke as if the garden was a product of his own labor. Maud looked over at the old gardener standing in the

corner, hands folded behind his back. He did not seem to object to the duke taking credit for this endeavor. Perhaps they worked at it together.

Lord Tilbury looked up at the leafy branches that surrounded them. “I suppose many would find the orange trees to be far more beautiful, but it is the difficulty of cultivating the pineapple that makes it the crown of the collection.”

“So perhaps you ought to call this place a pinerie,” said Maud, a faint smile playing on her lips, “rather than an orangerie?”

“A most excellent idea,” said Lord Tilbury, his own face lighting up in response to hers.

“Geoffrey,” said Helena’s voice from the door of the warm orangerie. “Are you quite finished yet? I have been holding the tea a quarter of an hour.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Lord Tilbury, turning to his guests. “It seems I am boring you and starving you too.”

“Oh, not at all,” said Maud and her mother in unison.

“It has been most enlightening,” said Lady Aldine, turning to accompany Helena back to the parlor. “I wanted an orangerie long ago, but Lord Aldine did not see the need for such an expense.”

Maud would have followed behind her mother, but Lord Tilbury stepped beside her and murmured in a low voice. “If you would tarry a moment, Lady Worlington, I could show you the lemon tree.”

As her mother and Helena disappeared, arm in arm, through the doorway, Maud’s heart began to beat a little faster. “Of course,” she said, her last solitary encounter with the duke—and Ralph’s warning—playing over in her mind. But then, yesterday evening had been under the spell of midnight and spirits, and here they were in a light-filled room with the old gardener still in attendance. There could be no harm in lingering a moment.

Lord Tilbury offered Maud his own arm, and they walked over to the far corner where the yellow-fruited tree was reflected against the glass. She looked up at the tree, conscious that the tall duke was looking intently at her.

“And how does this differ from the orange tree?” asked Maud.

“I need to speak with you.”

“The fruit is a different shape,” said Maud, struggling to keep her voice firm and acutely aware that this conversation was about to lose its botanical character. “Although it seems to have the same sort of skin and pulp.”

"Last night, by the kitchen—"

"They are both categorized as citrus, I assume." Maud's voice grew louder and as acidic as the lemon itself.

"Can you not allow me to apologize?"

"No," she said, more softly and more fiercely. "I would rather pretend that nothing happened." It was then that she realized that the gardener had disappeared.

O

"I CAN ASSURE you," said Geoffrey, "that something most certainly did happen. I came to your house this morning to apologize, but I did not want to make the situation worse by speaking of it in front of another. And then, when I noted your distress, I felt even more of a bacon-brained fool."

"My *distress*?" Lady Worlington's eyes were shooting darts in his direction.

"Yes." Geoffrey could not help but think that this dark-haired widow was even more intriguing when she was angry. "You were crying."

She laughed—a little harshly, a little hollowly. "Lord Tilbury, take a piece of advice from someone who has been in the world much longer than you: when a lady is crying, it is not always over *you*."

Geoffrey refused to believe that she was insensible to the incident that had occurred. "I acted unconscionably—"

"You were drunk." Her nostrils flared as she faced him. He could not help but admire the rise and fall of her bosom under the white lace that edged her orange dress.

"That is of no consequence. I am not drunk now. I wish to express my deep remorse for my actions and make an offer to you—"

"Apparently you are still drunk, sir. Drunk on your own importance. You know your Scott as well as I—well then, let me tell you, I am no Lady Clara. You may think me an easy mark as I am a widow, but I tell you—"

"What are you talking about?" said Geoffrey, appalled at her suggestion. He paused to regroup. "I am not trying to seduce you, Lady Worlington. I mean marriage. I want to repair my mistake by asking you to become my wife."

But rather than assuaging her annoyance, this admission only seemed to anger her further.

“Another over-hasty engagement to connect our families? I think not, your grace. I’m sure we should both of us repent at leisure.”

“On the contrary, I think we should deal well together. We are of similar upbringings, similar fortunes. And I think last night is proof that neither of us find each other wholly unattractive.” He took a deep breath, recalling how her body had responded in kind when he pulled her to him under the mistletoe.

“Lord Tilbury,” said Lady Worlington, putting up a hand to halt both his words and his recollections, “I have only known you for two days. I know nothing of our similarities, and certainly nothing of your temperament, your manners, or your morals—although the latter two, perhaps, I may call into question considering the way you forced yourself upon me.”

“I can only plead the folly of youth.”

“And that is exactly the problem! You are a *youth*. I have been married seven years already. I am a widow, a dowager baroness.”

“In name only.” Geoffrey would defy anyone to call this woman old. “You are barely my elder. And why should a marriage prove unsuccessful simply because of a few years’ difference in our births?”

She groaned. “Why are you so determined to marry me?”

“Because I have compromised your reputation.”

“On the contrary, Lord Tilbury. Whatever happened is between you and me. No one saw a thing.”

At that moment, Will Aldine’s voice sounded from the door of the orangerie. “Bring a lemon when you come in, Tilbury. I always like some in my tea.”

CHAPTER 7

Maud fumed inwardly.

After the incident in the orangerie and Will's surprise entrance, tea had been intolerable. First, Will had amused them all by explaining his irregular appearance. "I awaken from my slumbers," he said, "to discover that my family has gone on without me to visit the house of my betrothed." Here, he reached for Helena's hand. "What could I do but dress quickly and climb into the saddle with all speed? A pity I missed the tour of the orangerie—it would have been most… informative."

And then Will had winked at her over his teacup. Maud had been too angry to blush. Angry at Will, angry at Tilbury, angry at the conventions of the world. She would *not* be trapped into marrying some beardless boy because of a few seconds under a sprig of mistletoe. If Will shared anything about what he had overheard—her fingers were tensed and ready to throttle him.

Lord Tilbury seemed to greet the awkwardness more gracefully. He conversed smoothly with Lady Aldine, answering more questions about pineapple cultivation and then querying her about Christmas traditions in the Aldine family.

"I've given the servants their presents already," said Lady Aldine. "A shirt for each of the men and an apron for each of the girls. And a small portion of tobacco and tea for the upper servants. Helena, my dear, did you arrange gifts for your staff?"

Helena started and looked up from Will's face. "I don't know…I think Geoffrey arranged all that."

Lord Tilbury nodded sagely. "Yes, buckles and brooches all around. A watch for the butler and a hat for the housekeeper."

Maud looked at the long-legged duke. She suspected that he arranged a good many things in this household—menus, dinner engagements…marriages? She looked from Helena to Will. That seemed to be one thing the duke had *not* arranged—or at least, had done so under protest. Helena, helpless with so many other things,

had managed to get her own way.

"I need some new hats myself," said Helena.

"Then you had best buy some," returned her brother. "Are you not shopping tomorrow to buy gowns for your trousseau?"

"Oh, why, yes, I suppose I am!"

The duke looked in Maud's direction. "Perhaps Lady Worlington would like to accompany you and aid you in your selection."

Maud stared at Tilbury. It was one thing to direct a younger sister's activities, but *she* disliked being managed in this manner. And certainly, Helena had no interest in a strange woman accompanying her. The fact that Maud had assisted her in her infirmity at the ball could only make it more awkward.

But Helena was given no chance to speak.

"A capital idea!" said Will. "I'm sure that Maud is yearning to put together a trousseau, either her own or somebody else's."

Then he had winked again at Maud while she seethed inwardly and outwardly expressed her pleasure at the prospect.

And so the matter was settled, and in a manner far from Maud's liking. The requisite half hour for paying a call soon passed, and the Aldines stood to take their leave of the Angiers. Will pressed a kiss on Helena's hand while Lady Aldine pressed a kiss on Helena's cheek. Maud alone held back silently, unwilling to be involved in this show of affection.

Lord Tilbury stepped up beside her and spoke in a low voice. "I thank you for your visit, Lady Worlington. I always enjoy showing off my orangerie—or is it a pinerie now? I must send over a basket of lemons next since your brother dotes upon them."

"I shall manage my brother," she whispered fiercely.

"I look forward to hearing of your success in the matter." And then before she could object, he took her hand and brought it up to his lips. "Or not. In which case," he said with a wry smile, "my offer still stands."

O

MAUD STORMED INTO the house in a mood as foul as the puddles that covered the London streets. She was determined to speak to Will immediately, but as he had ridden his horse to the Angiers' town house, he did not return with them in the carriage. She waited twenty minutes in the entrance hall, but it soon became apparent that he was

not coming straight home. If he had gone to his club, he could be hours. Maud stamped her foot in an unusual display of anger and headed upstairs to her room.

Perkins must have seen the thunderclouds on her face as she came in, for the maid was not so forward in her talk and was treading almost warily as she took Maud's spencer jacket to hang in the wardrobe.

At last, the girl could bear the silence no longer and burst out with a question. "An' did you receive any compliments on your orange dress?"

Maud groaned and turned round so that Perkins could unlace the aforementioned article of clothing. "Indeed. Lady Helena confessed that she had never seen anyone wear this shade of orange so successfully. And your handsome Lord Tilbury liked it so much, he proposed marriage to me in the orangerie."

Perkins gasped. "He did not! Lawks, my lady, you're having your fun with me."

Maud snorted, but did not confirm or deny the statement.

"Not but that he wouldn't have wanted to," said Perkins loyally, "with your ladyship in such bright bloom today." She took off the dress and handed Maud a Chinese-patterned wrapper which Maud put immediately over her underclothes to ward off the chill. "I 'spect that gentlemen usually need more than a few days to work up their courage for that sort of thing."

"Usually," said Maud. Although sometimes an unguarded moment under a mistletoe sprig decided it for them. Blast it all! If Will said anything, she would murder him.

Her previous experience of courtship had been far less precipitate. Humboldt Worlington, her elderly suitor, had sent her flowers on Mondays and Thursdays, as regular as clockwork. He had invited her to a weekly outing, either a promenade in Hyde Park or a picnic in the square. He had requested her father's permission to call on her and, after a suitable period had elapsed, had asked her father's permission to propose marriage. Nothing had been done rashly, nothing in the heat of passion. Even after their wedding, Hum's kisses could be described as nothing so much as chaste.

Their marriage had been companionable, at least on a superficial level. Hum always enjoyed hearing about her walks on the moors. She always found his slippers for him when they sat by the fireside. True, he never spoke with her about the matters of the estate—figures and

concepts too tedious for her to worry her pretty little head about. And she had never spoken with him about the poetry she read in books or the poetry that she wanted out of life. But still, they had rubbed along well enough for several years—until Victor's cancer had come between them.

She could hardly imagine such a comfortable domesticity with Geoffrey Angiers. He was not settled enough in his character to be a steady sort of husband. And he had certainly only offered for her for the sake of propriety. No doubt he fervently regretted that kiss but felt obliged to do the right thing. Well, she would not have a husband who regretted her. And she would not have a husband so young and impetuous as to be kissing widows under a mistletoe in the first place.

Maud curled up on the Roman couch at the foot of her bed. Was her copy of Scott in the library still? She suddenly had the urge to read Lochinvar again.

"I don't know as I should tell you this, my lady, as you're already in a brown study, but I overheard Cook sayin' that Mr. Stapleton Aldine is expected for dinner again."

Maud took a deep breath. She had not realized that Stapleton was such a regular guest in Grosvenor Square. Her mother had but rarely spoken of him in her letters. She hoped that Ralph would be there at dinner too to help manage Stapleton and keep his unctuous speeches from all being directed at her—there was nothing Ralph was better at than managing people.

She looked up sharply. Not only was Ralph needed to manage Stapleton, but she needed him there to manage Will—to help her confront him and enjoin him to silence! She could not imagine the embarrassment if Will's loose lips let fall his eavesdroppings over the course of dinner. "Perkins," she said. "Could you bring me my writing tray? And tell Cook there'll be yet another guest for dinner."

O

MAUD WORE RED to dinner, and pearls—a striking combination. Not that there was anyone in particular she wanted to impress, but the ensemble fortified her own spirits.

Ralph, the most punctual of all their family, was waiting at the bottom of the stairs when she descended. "You look lovely, Maudie."

She smiled, pleased that he had obeyed her summons, and stopped at the bottom of the staircase. "How old would you think me now if

you were seeing me for the first time?"

"Six and twenty," said Ralph promptly, too clever by far to play this game. "Old enough to be wise, and young enough to be beautiful."

"Indeed," said Stapleton, gliding into the room. "You have such a way with words, cousin." He looked at Maud as one would look at a ripe summer strawberry. "Exceedingly beautiful," he said, rubbing his lower lip against his top one.

Maud frowned, ignoring the compliments. Stapleton's timing was unfortunate. Now she would have no opportunity to apprise Ralph of the recent events before they went in to dinner.

"And is Eustace joining us as well tonight?" Maud asked with as much cordiality as she could muster.

"Father says I must," said an adolescent voice, as young Eustace entered the room on the heels of his parent.

"I was just remarking on how charming our cousin looks tonight," said Stapleton, eager to have his compliments acknowledged. "Such a becoming symmetry of face and figure paired with a native intelligence and beauty of spirit. Would you not agree, Eustace?"

Eustace sniffed and looked around sulkily, his lanky body expressing childish petulance with every flop of his long arms. "Indeed, Father, she reminds me most aptly of the learned Chaucer's Wife of Bath."

Stapleton beamed, no doubt pleased at the display of his son's erudition. Ralph, who had actually read the text being alluded to, was more skeptical. "How so, Eustace? Explain yourself."

"Cousin Maud is most fond of scarlet," mumbled Eustace, "as was the Wife of Bath. And she is a widow to boot."

"And there the similarities end," said Ralph, "for you would not wish to imply that your cousin is overbearing or brazen."

"No, indeed," said Stapleton, stepping in to speak for Eustace. "I am certain that Cousin Maud is the most modest and biddable of women."

And not at all on the lookout for a new husband, thought Maud bitterly, memories of the duke's proposal resurfacing in her mind. She was not sorry she had rejected him. But still, the comparison between his lithe form and Stapleton's portly middle aged one was unsettling. Surely, there must be more men in this world than those who were too old, too young, or too obsequiously rotund.

Her parents and brother entered the room at just that moment,

and everyone was ready to proceed in to dinner. “Good of you to come again, Stapleton,” said Lord Aldine, taking his nephew’s arm in lieu of a cane. “We must have our game of draughts after dinner.”

The courses were modest since most of the kitchen help, besides Cook, had taken the day after Christmas to laze about, as was customary. However, Lady Aldine had elevated the event by ordering the pineapple to be brought in as a centerpiece.

“Are we not to eat it?” asked Eustace, staring at the spiky fruit.

“Certainly not!” said Lady Aldine. “We must display it for at least a week before we cut into it. That is, if Maud does not mind, as it is hers.”

“Whatever you like, Mother,” said Maud, “although it would be a pity to let it rot on the table untasted.”

“My dear Dorothea loved pineapple above all other delicacies,” said Stapleton. “Where did such a glorious fruit originate?”

“Tilbury, actually,” said Will, his mouth crammed with cold chicken. “He sent it especially to Maud. I can’t think why.”

Maud’s lips pressed into a straight line. She refrained from making any riposte, praying that Will would manage to keep his hints discreet.

“Ah,” said Stapleton, his brow furrowing. “I have a gift for you as well, cousin. I was thinking to save it until Twelfth Night, but perhaps the young nowadays are too impatient to wait that long. I shall bring it by tomorrow, my dear Maud, if you will be home in the afternoon.”

Maud nearly choked on her wine. A gift from Stapleton? She did not know what worried her more, the contents or the import of such a gesture.

After the second course had been cleared, Eustace took himself off to the billiards room and Lord Aldine and Stapleton sat down to a game of draughts in the drawing room. Maud gave Ralph a knowing nod, and they were able to escape to the library for a *tête-à-tête*. But Will, it seemed, had the same notion, for as soon as they sat down, he materialized. And there they were—the three Aldine siblings together again as if it were old times.

“Ugh,” said Maud, glaring at her little brother. She plopped down on the most comfortable of the wingback chairs.

“So kind,” said Will sardonically, lifting his coattails and sitting opposite her.

“Now,” said Ralph, rising again to shut the door and ensure secrecy. “What is all this about? I receive a message from my brother instructing me to come to the house tonight, and half an hour later, I

receive a similar message from my sister enjoining the same. I can only suppose there is something afoot that involves you both. Out with it, if you please."

"Ladies first," said Will smugly.

"Very well, I *will* go first!" replied Maud hotly. "Last night, you will recall that Lord Tilbury burnt his fingers and I took him to the kitchen to find some butter."

"Burnt his fingers!" hooted Will. "An apt metaphor."

"Patience," said Ralph, holding up a hand to silence Will. "You mentioned this morning that something had happened between you, but you also declined to say what that something was."

"Can you blame me? It is not something easily shared with one's brothers. He was a trifle disguised, the housemaids had hung a sprig of mistletoe, and he kissed me—rather passionately."

"Did he force himself on you?" demanded Ralph.

"Not at all," said Maud, feeling strangely reluctant to defame the duke. She remembered the time Victor, with his odious wet lips, had forced a kiss on her—and no, there was no comparison. "It was quite mutual," she said, glaring at her brothers.

Will gawked at this admission, clearly never having considered his sister to be a woman led by physical desire.

Ralph simply cleared his throat.

"Then this morning I find that the daft boy has it in his head that he has compromised me somehow and needs to offer marriage—"

"An offer which I walked in on," interjected Will, "over at Tilbury's house."

Ralph's eyebrows rose as high as the vaulted library ceiling. "And you replied what exactly, Maudie?"

"I said certainly not!" Maud smoothed down the skirt of her red dress. "Why on earth should I want a child for a husband? I am in no way compromised, as I made very clear to him. And my virtue shall remain unsullied so long as Will does not go about spreading stories." She paused and looked from one brother to the other, waiting for their verdict.

Will began the assault. "How dare he! Act all high and mighty, and then this! I almost believe he did it on purpose to spite me."

"A rather unfair assessment of our sister's charms," said Ralph, "which were certainly a more likely motivation for his actions. And besides, I observed him this morning when he came to call—he seemed genuinely agitated, remorseful even. I suppose he meant to

offer for you then, but my presence forestalled him."

Will growled in annoyance. "Are you sure nothing else happened besides a kiss? Now that I think on it, you *were* gone a long while."

Maud shook her head in disbelief at her brother's prurient suggestion. "No. Do you wish something had?"

Will snorted and dodged that question. "The bounder ought to be punished somehow!"

Ralph gave a wry smile. "I don't relish the idea of calling him out for it, and neither, I think, do you."

Will winced. "Indeed, that seems less than desirable."

"Then if Maudie is inclined to let the matter drop," said Ralph, "I think you must too."

Will began to tap his foot impatiently. "Would Father say the same?"

"Will!" gasped Maud and Ralph in unison.

"You would not dare tell Father," said Maud. "You know what the doctor said!"

"He is to hear no unpleasant surprises," said Ralph. "Any sudden excitement could be the end of him."

"Very well then," conceded Will, abandoning that idea.

"And you will not tell Helena!" demanded Maud. "She is too innocent to understand, and I do not want her to think ill of me."

"Oh, Helena will think what I tell her to think," said Will, waving his hand.

Ralph's eyes narrowed. "Careful, Will."

"Very well then," said Will with a sigh. "I shall keep my hand close to my chest." He rose to his feet, and then his boyish face broke into a grin. "I should really thank you for this, Maud. At first glance, I thought this little escapade to be an out and out insult to our family, but I see now that it gives me the upper hand over that insufferable prig Angiers. I shall hold it over him for a long while. If you're inclined to keep him on the hook a little longer and break his heart before cutting him loose, I would thank you even more."

"No, thank you," said Maud acidly.

"Ah, very well then. One can only ask for so much. Now then, I mustn't keep Eustace waiting any longer. I shall leave you two to savage my character in peace while I play billiards." Will nodded to Ralph and ducked out the library door.

Ralph rose from his chair as well and gave Maud a quick kiss on the cheek. "I must go too, Maudie—back to the office, for documents

don’t write themselves.”

“Oh, Ralph! I’m sorry to have called you away. But…thank you,” said Maud firmly. She did not know how she would have sorted things with Will if Ralph had not been there with his level sense and good judgment.

“Always,” said Ralph, and then he disappeared as well, leaving Maud to stare into the fire with a jumble of thoughts in her mind. Why did Will think Lord Tilbury to be an insufferable prig? And what injury had Tilbury done to him that he should be so eager to revenge himself? And what enchantment had lurked in that one kiss that made her keep thinking of it no matter how hard she tried to put it out of her mind?

The Third Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 8

Maud took particular care in dressing the next morning. She would not be the dowdy Town Tabby accompanying a younger friend to pick out gowns. Helena might be a diamond of the first water, but Maud could be a sapphire of the same quality. The dark blue of her walking dress held a shimmer of iridescence, and its gathered neck framed her shoulders becomingly. She chose dark brown furs to bring out her own dark hair and a bonnet with a single elegant blue ribbon.

When the Angiers' carriage came to collect her, she saw that Helena had brought along another friend as well—a curly black-haired friend from Sussex named Miss Cecil. The two girls were already chatting amiably when Maud entered the carriage, and she was relieved to see that she would not be required to prop up an entire end of a conversation between her and Helena.

"Who is your modiste, Lady Worlington?" asked Helena, admiring the fabric of her dress.

"I have not had a gown made up in London for some time, but when I do, it is with Madame DeLaittre—and please, you must call me Maud."

Maud could see the girl's eyes shining at that, and she knew that the offer meant something to her. She really must stop judging the girl so harshly—it was Cupid's fault, not Helena's, that the girl thought Will the loveliest catch in the sea.

Helena clapped her hands together. "What a lucky chance! For she is my modiste as well. Our styles are so different that I did not recognize her work on you."

"What a lovely coincidence," Maud murmured. She was sure that Madame DeLaittre would inquire when *she* was to purchase her next set of gowns. And in truth, she did not know. Her arrival from Devon had coincided with holiday preparations, and there had been no time yet to discuss her finances with her father. The question of where her pin money was to come from now was still unsettled…and unsettling.

"Have you been in London long, Miss Cecil?" Maud asked.

“Just for a week,” the young woman replied with a smile. “We do not come up often, but my brother arranged a trip for Christmas. My parents are here no longer, and I live with my brother in Sussex,” she explained.

Helena interjected herself. “Edwina is in quite the same circumstances as I, at least where parents and brothers are concerned.”

Miss Cecil laughed. “Yes, although I think that Edward and I rub along a little better together than you and Geoffrey. He lets me do as I please, and I do the same. Perhaps it is the reason that neither of us is anxious to be married.”

“Yes, well, I have my own designs in that area,” said Helena with a giggle.

“What, you mean on Edward?” asked Miss Cecil, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Surely a viscount is enough for you….”

“No, you goose,” said Helena, “designs for you! I think you and Geoffrey would deal together splendidly.”

Maud was beginning to feel as if she had intruded on a private conversation between two schoolgirls. She touched a hand to her temples. A headache was threatening if all this chatter did not cease.

“What do you think, Maud?” said Helena, bright-eyed. “Would not Geoffrey and Edwina make a brilliant match?”

Maud’s reply was firm and crisp. “Seeing as how I barely know your brother and have just met your friend, I am hardly in a position to judge.”

She stared at Miss Cecil as the carriage pulled to a halt in front of the dressmaker’s shop. Indeed, she did not know the woman, but at least she was young. That was enough recommendation of itself, for Lord Tilbury surely needed a young wife that he could manage as he did his sister.

The ladies exited the carriage and entered the shop. Madame DeLaittre was out of sight in the workroom, but her assistant fetched her immediately at the sight of such promising customers.

“Ah, Lady Helena!” said the modiste warmly. “I have not yet congratulated you on the upcoming nuptials.”

“Thank you,” said Helena, blushing. “You must guess that it is the reason we are here. I must have a dress made for the wedding, and a few more besides.”

“A few? You mean a good many, yes?” said Madame DeLaittre. “And if I hear correctly, the wedding is in just a fortnight?”

“Yes, it is very soon,” said Helena. A worried look crossed her face. “Will there be time enough?”

Madame DeLaittre waved a competent hand to banish her worries. “Today we choose the fabrics. Tomorrow and the next week we sew the dresses. It will be done whatever day you say it must be done.” She brought Helena and Miss Cecil over to a large stand holding bolts of the finest pink silk, white muslin, and yellow satin.

While the younger ladies touched and admired the bolts of cloth, Maud took the seat near the door usually reserved for indulgent husbands waiting for fickle wives to make a choice. The dressmaker, allowing Helena some space to explore and exclaim, moved closer to Maud. “Lady Worlington, it is a pleasure to see you. The dresses I shipped to you last—they were pleasing to you?”

“Exceedingly,” said Maud. She waved a hand over her blue skirts. “As you can see, I am wearing one of them as we speak.”

“Ah,” said the modiste. She lowered her voice. “I know they arrived soon after the passing of Sir Humboldt. In the sadness, *eh bien*, it must have been forgotten, but since you are here, I will remind you—I have not yet received the payment for them.”

Maud cringed inwardly. How like Victor to omit paying her bills as soon as his father had passed on. “I beg your pardon for the oversight—I will see to it right away.”

“*Merci.*” The modiste moved away to answer Miss Cecil’s questions about the whitework, leaving Maud to her thoughts. The question about her pin money had become imperative now—she did not know how to speak to her father about it without upsetting him. Once again, she must ask for help from Ralph.

The airiest muslins were chosen for Helena’s new gowns, as well as a soft silk for the wedding dress. Maud reflected that Helena, with her perfectly proportioned limbs, would look exactly like a Grecian statue, as sophisticated as one of the fashion plates in Ackerman’s magazine.

“And now,” said Madame DeLaittre, after Helena had made her decisions. “We must take the measurements.”

“Did you not just take Helena’s measurements a month ago for her white Christmas dress?” asked Miss Cecil.

Madame DeLaittre nodded but cast an appraising eye on Helena’s slim figure. “But sometimes the Christmas pudding, *eh bien*, it changes one’s shape, yes?”

Helena giggled, a little self-consciously. “Of course.” The dressmaker took a little notebook and a pencil and escorted her to the

curtained-off back room where they could be out of sight from any passers-by who might be looking in the windows of the shop.

It was just as well, for no sooner had they disappeared behind the curtain than the bell on the door tinkled and in walked two gentlemen. “Edward!” said Miss Cecil, stepping up to greet the shorter, black-haired gentlemen in a beaver. “And Lord Tilbury! I thought the two of you were at the races.”

Maud stared hard at the young duke. Was he following her about now? He had certainly known she would be with his sister at the dressmaker’s, for indeed, he had orchestrated events just so.

“Yes, we *were* at the races,” said Miss Cecil’s brother, “but both our horses had such bad luck that we did not feel it worth the effort to back a second race. Tilbury suggested that we find some better company than ourselves, and so we are off to find some ladies and take them to a tearoom. Do you know any ladies here who would care to join us?”

“Helena has just gone in the back room to get her measurements, but I’m sure we should all be delighted to join you once she’s finished. That is, if Lady Worlington has no pressing appointments to return home for?”

Miss Cecil and the two gentlemen turned their attention to the wingback chair. Maud could see that Mr. Cecil’s face was all eagerness while Lord Tilbury’s face was inscrutable. Perhaps he had found time to revise his hasty offer and was now relieved to escape a *mésalliance* with a woman far too old for him.

Maud recalled that her only appointment this afternoon was Stapleton’s visit. He had promised to come bearing gifts, and she shuddered to think what that could mean. Very well then—if it meant escaping her cousin’s effusions, she would gladly accept the awkwardness of tea with a man whom she had rejected not twenty-four hours since.

She rose from her chair and looked Mr. Cecil in the eye. “What an enchanting idea! I would be delighted to join you.”

O

THE GENTLEMEN, IT seemed, had taken a hackney to Madame DeLaittre’s establishment, and so five passengers now crowded into the Angiers’ carriage on their way to the tea room. The ladies occupied the forward side—Helena squashed in the middle between

Maud and Miss Cecil—while the gentlemen occupied the opposite bench. “We only need Will now,” said Helena, “to make it six!”

Maud could not help feeling that the jolliness would have diminished had Will been there—for then, Helena would have ignored the rest of them and Will and Tilbury would have been glowering at each other all through the carriage ride. As it was, Tilbury was laughing most heartily now as Miss Cecil recounted a story of their many mishaps in reaching London last week, a story involving a damaged carriage wheel, an uncouth room at an inn, and the threat of an ill-prepared highwayman.

“I still must go to the milliner’s to see about the hats you promised me,” said Helena.

“All in good time,” said Lord Tilbury. “But first, tea.”

“Indeed!” said Mr. Cecil. “Backing a losing horse is hungry work, I’ll have you know.”

“One of you Londoners must tell us poor Sussex folk the best place to go,” said Miss Cecil. “Lady Worlington, surely you could suggest a teahouse?”

“I am a Londoner but lately,” said Maud, jolting into Helena as the carriage went over an uneven patch of cobblestones. “I’m afraid I have as little expertise in teahouses as I have in pineapples.”

“Well then,” said Lord Tilbury, taking command of the situation, “you are fortunate, Lady Worlington, to know a gentleman who is versed in both.” He tapped on the side of the carriage and opened the window to alert the driver of their new direction. “Gunter’s in Berkeley Square.” He turned back to the ladies to explain his choice. “In the winter, tea and coffee—in the summer, London’s best ices.”

Within a few minutes, they had pulled up in front of Gunter’s. The gentlemen exited the carriage and Lord Tilbury held out a gloved hand to help the ladies disembark. Maud was the last to step down, and Lord Tilbury caught her eye as he touched her hand. He was certainly making no effort to avoid her after the embarrassment of yesterday.

Perhaps he was not embarrassed—well then, neither would she be. The simple fact of having shared a kiss need not stand between two people forever. And as long as Will kept his mouth closed, no one need know of the event. A kiss, unlike an incriminating letter, was not so easily published to the ton.

The party swept in to Gunter’s, and after finding a table to deposit the ladies, the gentlemen went up to the counter to order tea.

“I do wish Will was here!” said Helena pensively. “I asked him to come to the modiste’s as well, but he had other things on his schedule for the day.”

Maud politely refrained from snorting, her few days back in London having made her aware that Will’s schedule consisted mainly of late night carousing and late morning slumbers. But such a thought could not be shared with a bride-to-be. “I’m certain you would prefer your gowns be a surprise to him,” she offered kindly.

“Oh, yes!” said Helena, her face lighting up. “That is a brilliant notion, Lady W—I mean, Maud. You are right—it is better that he is not here today.”

Maud folded her hands in her lap, too generous to tell Helena that Will’s absence would likely be a great part of her life once the marriage was finalized. But then—that sort of advice was not something a young lady listened to. Sometimes experience was the harshest and most believable teacher.

O

GEOFFREY SOON HAD a tray full of cups to carry back to the table as well as a large plate of seedcake and biscuits.

“A marvelous little shop,” said Cecil, looking around at the paneled walls and gilt mirrors. He bore the full teapot back to the table, and they waited for their tea to steep. Lady Worlington began to take the cups off the tray and hand them round to the other four clustered around the small table. Geoffrey noted how easily she assumed the role of hostess. It was an aplomb that he hoped Helena would one day exhibit, but he doubted rather than expected such a development. The party helped themselves to the seedcake while they waited for the tea to brew.

“Come now,” said Geoffrey, breaking the silence that enveloped the chewing table, “we shall play a game to pass the time until our tea is ready.”

“What game?” asked Cecil.

“Concatenation.”

Miss Cecil laughed. “What a mouthful of a word! It is not a game we have in Sussex. Pray tell, what is it?”

“Oh, Geoffrey!” interjected Helena, setting down her seedcake. “You know I am too stupid by half to play such a game.”

“Nonsense,” said Geoffrey, with a zeal that was more kind than

truthful. He looked over to Miss Cecil. “It is simply a game where one says a word, and the next person quickly follows it with another—either an opposite thing, a similar thing, or a related thing.”

Miss Cecil’s black curls bobbed up and down as she tilted her head in puzzlement. “I do not understand—how difficult can it be to simply say a word that relates to another?”

“The difficulty,” said Helena, “is that they must all begin with the same letter. If all twenty-six letters were at my disposal, I might succeed, but one letter!—I am dizzy before I begin.”

“And are you dizzy, Lady Worlington?” Geoffrey asked, giving a bow to the dark-haired widow across the table from him. Up until this point, she had been far friendlier to Edward Cecil than she had been to him, but at least she had not cut him entirely. He was appealing now to her sense of competition—and as he had learned at the Aldine Christmas, Lady Worlington could not stand to be beaten in a game.

“Dizzy? Certainly not,” said Lady Worlington. He could not help admiring the way her full lips parted when she spoke. “I accept your challenge without hesitation.”

“I shall pick a letter for you,” said Miss Cecil, acting the referee. She looked from Geoffrey to Lady Worlington. “P.”

Lady Worlington did not wait for half a second before she was off.

“Paper.”

“Pen.”

“Pardon.”

“Prison.”

“Pauper.”

“Prince.”

“Parliament.”

“Pri’Minister.”

“Pitt.”

“Peach.”

“Pear.”

“Pantaloons.”

“Popinjay.”

“Pink of fashion.”

“I say,” interjected Cecil, “that’s three words, Tilbury. She’s cornered you, I think! The bad luck from the races still attends us.”

“And even before ‘pink of fashion,’ I think,” said Helena, “for how does a pear relate to pantaloons?”

“My dear Helena, have you never seen a pair of pantaloons?”

asked Geoffrey. He noticed Lady Worlington glance involuntarily at his own set of gray pantaloons tucked into his glossy leather Hessians.

"I must acknowledge you victor," said Geoffrey good-naturedly. "And as your prize, my dear lady, will you pour the tea?"

Lady Worlington laughed and lifted the flowered teapot. "I am not certain that you understand the nature of prizes, Lord Tilbury, but I will oblige."

Geoffrey's heart lifted a little to hear her banter with him. It had galled him yesterday that she thought him a child. He might have just come into his majority six months ago, but he was used to managing a household, and his sister, ever since his father had died. He could navigate a dining room and a ballroom with ease, talk economics with tenants and politics with cabinet members, and discuss art and literature and theater with the aesthetes. No one at Angelo's thought him anything less than a man. And despite what she had said, Geoffrey suspected Lady Worlington had not considered him a child either when her arms were wrapped around his body, pulling his lips closer to hers.

He watched her rounded arms suspending the teapot in the air as she poured the steaming liquid. Earlier, when he had made his decision to offer for her, he had been reconciled to the idea, convinced that it would be no bad thing and that they should deal well together as man and wife. But when she had rejected him, there was no corresponding sense of relief. He had felt disappointment, regret, as if the offer had come from his heart itself and was not necessitated by circumstances. All through tea yesterday, while he manfully upheld his end of the conversation with Lady Aldine, the fear of what stories Will Aldine might spread abroad seemed insignificant compared to the loss he had just sustained.

What was wrong with him? Was he falling in love with a woman he had met a mere handful of times? Impossible! And yet, if not, why would he be so crushed by her refusal? He had woken up this morning determined to see her again—the loss at the races had proved a convenient excuse. He must find a way to prolong the afternoon, to help her fall back into that comfortable camaraderie they had shared before he had ruined things with his precipitate actions in the stairwell.

They all had their cups now—black tea from China with a hint of orange to it. Geoffrey had taken no more than one sip when a messenger boy approached the table and took up position next to Lady

Worlington's chair. Arching an eyebrow, she removed the cup from her lips and placed it carefully on the table. Geoffrey cocked an ear to listen in, while still maintaining an air of nonchalance.

"Lady Worlington," said the lad, giving a bob for politeness. "I've been entrusted with this message for you." He handed her a folded scrap of paper, and bowing again, backed away from the table and left the shop. No reply must be needed.

"I beg your pardon," said Lady Worlington to the company, unfolding the scrap down on her lap beneath the rim of the table to ensure privacy as she read it.

"Are you still wishing to visit the milliner's?" asked Miss Cecil, looking away from Lady Worlington for politeness' sake. She seemed to be enjoying the short respite and small refreshment at Gunter's, but she was no doubt eager to see her friend's expedition out to the end.

"I am a little tired," said Helena, "but what is fatigue when shopping awaits? I must have a new bonnet with ostrich feathers!"

Geoffrey shook his head, feigning horror at the bills that would arrive on his doorstep in the coming week. He was generous with Helena—if not with her peccadilloes, at least with her allowance. He hoped Will would be generous as well. Helena would have a large settlement, and her pin money could easily be provided from the interest, but Geoffrey realized he must see that the articles were drawn up properly so that Will would not be tempted to squander the principal. A gamer was the most unpredictable sort of man, for when the vice took over, he lost all control of his pocketbook.

"I should like a new hat as well," said Mr. Cecil, "but it may be a forlorn hope that you ladies would alter your itinerary to suit me."

"No, indeed," said Miss Cecil. "We will not have you gentlemen boring us with *your* shopping. There are certain to be no ostrich feathers at your haberdashers. If you insist on finding a top hat, we must part ways. Do you not agree, Lady Worlington?"

Lady Worlington looked up, startled, crumpling the piece of paper and stuffing it into her silver beaded reticule. "Oh, yes. I mean, perhaps…I do not know." It was clear she had not been following the conversation. "I am afraid that I must part ways as well, Miss Cecil. I have some business to attend to. If it is not too inconvenient, friends, could you drop me at my brother Ralph's office in St. James's before you proceed?"

"Of course," said Geoffrey, hiding his disappointment. The moment at Gunter's had almost brought them back to the good-

natured closeness they had enjoyed on Christmas afternoon. And now it was all slipping away again.

"But before we leave," said Cecil, "more seedcake. For one never knows with ladies when the shopping will end, and it would not do to perish from hunger." He passed the platter round the table as everyone laughed.

But Geoffrey, who was watching, noted that Lady Worlington's laughter was not as melodious as it usually was. And in fact, although her lips were smiling, the smile had nowhere reached the depths of her troubled brown eyes.

CHAPTER 9

Ralph paced back and forth in front of his desk as he dictated to his secretary. “Memorandum. Investigate the availability of property along Berkeley Square for Lord—”

A knock sounded on the door, and the secretary put down his pen, stood up, and opened it.

At the sight of a stylishly dressed woman, Ralph started. It was not often a female client visited him at his office—indeed, it was more standard practice for a solicitor to come calling at a lady’s home. But this was not just any client.

“Maudie! What a surprise!” He rubbed his hands together in a perplexed manner. The look on Maud’s face indicated that trouble was brewing.

Ralph dismissed his secretary without further thought, shutting the door behind him to ensure privacy. He kissed Maud’s cheek and beckoned to the chair in front of his desk. “Now then,” he said, sitting down as well. “I presume this is not a social call?”

“You are perceptive.” Maud removed her gloves. Ralph could see that her hands were shaking a little, either from cold or something else. “I am sorry to take up so much of your time—especially since I summoned you so peremptorily yesterday, but something has happened.”

“With…Lord Tilbury?”

“No, with someone else.” She took a breath. “With Victor Worlington.”

Ralph recalled their moment at the breakfast table yesterday—she had never finished relating what had happened to her in Devon. Whatever it was had scarred her, and Ralph had a premonition that Victor was at the bottom of it.

“I went to the dressmaker’s today,” said Maud, “and I discovered that Victor has paid none of my bills these six months or more.”

“Ah,” said Ralph, relieved to find it was no more than a small financial issue. “That is easily solved. I am sure you were used to your

husband managing affairs, but there is no reason you cannot take charge of that yourself now. You can learn how to pay your own bills —perhaps a secretary might be employed to assist you with your bookkeeping."

"Indeed, but the trouble is that I have no bookkeeping to assist with. I have no money, Ralph."

"But Maudie," said Ralph, "that is preposterous. Your marriage settlement was fifty thousand pounds. You should be receiving an annuity following Worlington's death—each year should earn you a tenth, or at least a twentieth, of the sum you brought into the marriage. I am certain your marriage agreement states as much."

"I am certain it does. But the point is that Humboldt's son, Victor, is determined to deny the terms of the agreement and to circumvent his father's will."

"The scoundrel! I know a good barrister who will take him to court—no judge would deny you your rights."

"Yes…." Maud's face drained of color. "But it is not that simple." She looked away from Ralph, and he could sense that she was about to unburden herself. "Several years ago, when I was at my lowest in Devon, I did something rather foolish. There was a young curate who was very kind to me. I was lonely, and I shared a little of my heart with him. He began to call on me frequently. He wrote me letters."

Ralph kept his face impassive, but inwardly he began to cringe. O Maudie! What is it you have done?

Maud's voice fell to a whisper. "I was not unfaithful, Ralph. But there was one letter I wrote…it was ill-advised. And, somehow, Victor gained possession of it. He has been using it ever since, as a weapon against me."

Ralph laid his hands flat on the desk. "I see. And he says that if you press for your jointure, he will make the letter public?"

"Just so. My reputation will be in tatters. No honest man will ever look at me again as anything other than apartments for let. He threatened to make the letter public six months ago when Hum died, but I pleaded with him and he agreed to hold off. In return, he forbade me to leave the property, and so I was stranded in Devon for six months, enduring the daily humiliation of his derision."

"But you are here in London now…."

Maud shrugged. "After some time had passed, it seemed that he had grown tired of his little game. I asked him if I might go back to my family and he agreed. I hoped that I was shut of him, albeit at the

price of my settlement. But this afternoon, while I was at a teahouse in London, a boy approached me and gave me a message.

She dug into her beaded reticule and, drawing out a scrap of paper, handed it to Ralph.

IN LONDON. SEE YOU SOON. –V.W.

Ralph frowned. “What do you think he means to do?”

“Heaven knows! Blackmail me into some other humiliation? Publish the letter and expose me?”

Ralph’s lips compressed into a tight line while he thought on the matter. “You say that a boy delivered the message while you were at a teahouse? It seems then that he is having you watched—how else would he know your whereabouts?”

Maud gasped. “I had not thought of that. He has been spying on me! Do you think he knows about—”

“—Tilbury? One hopes not. I don’t see how he could unless Will was extraordinarily quick to gab.” Ralph pursed his lips and tapped his fingers against the top of the solid oak desk. “We must find out what he wants…and in the meantime, are tradesmen dunning you for money?”

“Not yet,” said Maud, “but they may.”

“I would suggest applying to Lady Aldine then, for some pin money.” He paused delicately. “You have not explained the matter to either her or Father?”

“No.” Maud’s face was taut with worry. “Although I fear it will come out soon enough.”

“I fear it must as well. And indeed, better to them than to the whole of London. Father may rage at you at first, but he will know a way to help.” Ralph looked at her firmly. “Go home. Tell them.”

Maud rose from her chair. “Oh, very well, I shall, but I do not have the confidence you do in Father’s powers. He is not the same man he was seven years ago. He is *old*, Ralph! Every morning that I see him, I am surprised anew that he has lasted the night. And besides, is this not the kind of shock that the doctor warned against?”

Ralph sighed and stood up from his chair as well. “Aye, but if he must be dead to us in times like this, then he might as well be dead in deed. You must chance it, Maudie—your future is at stake. If I were of rank and means, I might contrive to find a way to silence Worlington for you, but—” He shrugged and looked away. At times like these, he

felt the full impotency of his birth. How could a bastard son and a solicitor call out a baronet? The man would refuse to meet him on the field and turn his chivalrous gesture into the laughingstock of London. No, if someone was to make Victor Worlington eat that letter, it would not be Ralph Aldine.

O

AFTER LADY WORLINGTON'S departure from the shopping expedition, Geoffrey's interest waned as well. He ordered the driver to set him and Cecil down and they let the ladies proceed on with the carriage while they took a hackney to the Society of Eccentrics.

Geoffrey was not a particular friend of Cecil's—the friendship between their sisters was the catalyst that threw them together occasionally—but Cecil was a good enough sort of fellow, and Geoffrey was happy to show him around the city of London while Miss Cecil so obligingly kept Helena entertained.

"Are you a member here?" Cecil asked, looking up at the stone lettering above the wooden doors.

"Not yet," said Geoffrey, "but I intend to ask my friend the Marquis de Montesquerrat to sponsor me. It is quite a notable society—men of science, men of letters, men of *les beaux arts*, all come together for the furtherance of human good. We may receive admittance if the marquis is in."

Montesquerrat was indeed inside, and within minutes after sending up a message, Geoffrey and Cecil found themselves ensconced in leather-upholstered chairs in front of a vigorous fire. The marquis, some five or six years older than Geoffrey, met Geoffrey's companion with cordiality and called for a waiter to bring more glasses. It was bitter cold outside and brandy was just the thing to warm up.

He offered Cecil his snuff box. "Do you partake, Mr. Cecil?"

"Not usually," said Cecil, "but when in London…." He took a small pinch and inhaled it with adequate skill.

"Ah, you do as the Londoners do?" replied the marquis. "A dangerous rule of behavior, *monsieur*. One would fall into all kinds of error if one followed the Londoners' examples indiscriminately. Just the other day, *mon dieu*, I saw a fellow with his collar points so high they covered half his face."

Cecil laughed. "Never fear, my lord. I do not aspire to dandyhood."

"*Eh bien*, some might say otherwise about our friend Tilbury."

Geoffrey shook his head with a grin. It was true that he had dressed smartly that day—the chance of coming across Lady Worlington while out with his sister had compelled him to take care with his cravat. But the clean lines of his tailored jacket and military gleam of his Hessians were far from dandyish in appearance.

"Perhaps you have been visiting with *des mademoiselles* again today, eh?" asked Montesquerrat.

Geoffrey tsked good-naturedly. "I was just telling my friend Cecil that this club discussed the higher matters of philosophy and art and human flourishing. You will convince him it is simply a rumor-mill like any watering spot in town."

"Human flourishing? *Certainement*, we speak of Geoffrey Angiers' flourishing. And rumors? I have heard more since I saw you last. I learn that a certain golden-haired, long-legged gentleman was seen on a green north of the city, fencing at dawn with an unnamed opponent."

"A duel?" asked Cecil, lifting his eyebrows at Geoffrey.

Geoffrey waved away the comment and rose from his chair to stand by the hearth. His cheeks were getting warm and what better way than to disguise that than with the heat of the fire. The marquis was a friend, but Cecil was merely an acquaintance. And besides, this was a matter that must be hidden from even those closest.

"Did you win?" asked Cecil, his interest piqued. No doubt there were few affairs of honor in Sussex.

"Of course he won!" replied the marquis. "Do you not know? He is the most dangerous gentleman in London!" The marquis' dark face began to pout a little. "Come, what was it over? Cards? A mademoiselle? You *must* satisfy my curiosity."

"Oh, cards, of course," said Geoffrey, with such a pertness in his voice that it rang false at once.

The marquis shook a stubby finger at him. "What is it you Englishmen say? Stop cutting shams with me, *monsieur*. Very well, if you will not tell me, I will find out on my own." He turned to Geoffrey's companion and patted his own shoulder proudly. "I am quite a good detective, Monsieur Cecil."

"I'm certain they're all in awe of your talents at Bow Street," replied Cecil with a gleam of amusement in his eyes. He stood up to join Geoffrey. "Shall we go? I must return to my lodgings to write some correspondence and dress for dinner, and then I think our sisters

have some sort of musical entertainment planned for us tonight."

"Indeed," said Geoffrey, taking his leave of the marquis. As he walked down the stairs of the Society of Eccentrics, he reflected that he was not in the mood for entertainment—but if Will Aldine was to be along, he could hardly avoid playing the duenna. It was an older brother's lot.

He wished that he had had the foresight to find some subterfuge to include Lady Worlington in the party. Their game of Concatenation at the tea shop had convinced him that he was not wholly despised in her eyes. He had even suspected a time or two that she was watching him surreptitiously from behind that veil of dark eyelashes that hid her eyes and her thoughts.

But with all the entertainments in London, it was too much to hope that she would be present at the same music hall tonight. And indeed, the distress on her face earlier and her sudden visit to her brother the solicitor hardly betokened a mind eager for amusement.

Just as well, he thought, duty crushing out the wistfulness in his thoughts. If word of the duel was starting to spread round town, he could hardly afford to relax his vigilance now. Helena and Will must be his sole charge, and Lady Worlington—wherever she might be tonight—must be relegated to the attic of his thoughts.

O

WHEN SHE ARRIVED home in the late afternoon, Maud was relieved to discover that Stapleton had come and gone. Her own arrival did not go unmarked, however, and before she could hurry upstairs to her room, she heard her mother's voice calling her to join them in the drawing room.

When she entered the room, she found her parents seated properly in front of the fire, legs folded, hands still, waiting for her to come in.

"Stapleton was quite disappointed not to find you home," said her father, from beneath his lap rug. There was a hint of rebuke in his tone.

"How unfortunate!" said Maud, trying to rouse her spirits enough to appear sincere. "The dress shopping with Lady Helena was a much longer excursion that I had anticipated." The scrap of paper she had received burned in her reticule like a live coal while Ralph's advice clanged against her memory like a fire iron. It seemed a singularly unpropitious time to discuss her difficulties with her parents, but then,

would there *ever* be a propitious moment?

"Ah, well, he left a gift for you," said Lady Aldine, fidgeting with her lace cap. Maud could detect the nervousness in her mother's voice.

Maud walked over to the small tea table where a dark wooden box sat. She opened it. The largeness of the cut emeralds inside the box astonished her. Maud picked up the necklace and stared openmouthed.

"They were Dorothea's," said Lord Aldine. "He wants you to have them."

"But I could never accept such a gift!" said Maud in astonishment. "Why ever would he give me such a thing?"

Her parents exchanged a glance. Lord Aldine cleared his throat. "My dear, I think it should be readily apparent. Dorothea has been gone two years or more, and our dear Stapleton has been looking for a wife for some time. He is a widower. You are a widow. You are well-acquainted with each other and suitable in temperament. He broached the matter to me some time ago, and now that you have returned to London, I can see no objection to the match."

Maud laid the necklace back in the box and shut it with a snap, and as she did so, something inside of her snapped as well. "Oh, indeed? Just as you saw no objection to my last marriage! Is there to be no consideration given for what *I* want?"

"What do you mean?" asked Lord Aldine, and he began to cough, his whole body shaking with the violence of the spasms. Lady Aldine leapt up from her chair and rushed over to take his hand until the fit had passed. Lord Aldine wiped a few flecks of spittle from his lips. "My memory is not so far gone, Maud. I never heard *any* objection to Worlington from you. Indeed, you favored the match at the time."

"I was eighteen years old!" said Maud. "I knew no better." She heard Ralph's voice inside her head urging her to moderate her sentiments. She was supposed to be asking her father for help, not casting recriminations on him.

"Harry," said Lady Aldine tentatively, "I do not think Maud has any particular affection for Stapleton."

"Rubbish," said Lord Aldine, sweeping his wife's observation into the corner like a pile of wood shavings. "That will come in time."

"No!" said Maud hollowly. "It will not."

Lord Aldine glared at her, his curved nose as stern as an eagle's beak, the weakness of old age combated by the force of his will. "You are no longer in mourning. You must find some useful purpose for

your life. Your brother Will marries soon—there is no reason for you to lag behind. I would think a woman of your age would long for an establishment of her own—for a husband, children."

Maud opened her mouth to protest, but her father croaked a command for silence. "Now," he said ominously, "I have invited Stapleton to our opera box tonight. Your mother goes to chaperon you. You *will* allow him to pay you court and you *will* wear those emeralds."

At this demand, Maud looked to her mother for support, but Lady Aldine refused to meet her eye. Instead, she clucked like a distressed chicken and looked away to the window. She was too conditioned to acquiescing to her husband's will to afford her daughter any aid, and in that moment, Maud despised her for it.

"Yes, Father," said Maud, but her tone was not exactly filial. She snatched up the emeralds and hurried upstairs to seek the quiet of her room.

CHAPTER 10

At home, Geoffrey discovered that the entertainment Helena had decided on for the evening was Mozart. They were to meet the Cecils and Will Aldine at the King's Theatre in the box which the Angiers had taken for the season. It was a performance they had already seen, but Helena deemed that to be of no consequence. "It is only right to take Edwina," said Helena, "for she is buried in Sussex most the year, and she will adore *Così fan tutte*."

Once at the theater, Helena had attempted to corner Geoffrey into offering her friend compliments. The duke was adroit, however, and he had managed to escape with only a few halfhearted homages. It was not that Miss Cecil was unsightly. On the contrary, she was a remarkably pretty girl, good-natured and pleasant. But Geoffrey found his mind occupied with a different woman altogether, one who would never dress in pale pink chiffon.

Will arrived late, shortly after the first act had already commenced. The two heroines, one bewigged in yellow tresses, the other in brown, were proclaiming their undying love for the soldiers to whom they were betrothed—as besotted as Helena, thought Geoffrey sourly, his own interest in Lady Worlington still not enough to make him feel kindly toward her brother.

"Hello, Tilbury," Will said with a brief nod. Geoffrey was pleased that he did not have to feign any effusions of pleasure. It was still galling to remember how Will had overheard his *tête-à-tête* with Lady Worlington in the orangerie, but so far, Helena seemed to be none the wiser. Perhaps Lady Worlington had done as promised and placed a stopper in that cask.

"Is your family using their box tonight?" asked Geoffrey.

"I don't know," shrugged Will—it had probably never occurred to him to ask. "But they haven't so far all season, so I should think not." He grimaced at Geoffrey. "My father is not exactly fond of going *out*, and my mother—well, she is a little too fond of it, and consequently, not allowed to go out as much as she would like."

Geoffrey's brows crinkled at that—from what he had seen, it was an apt description of the elder Aldines. Lord Aldine seemed to rule his much-younger wife with an unobliging, if not iron, fist. He wondered if Lady Worlington's late husband had been the same. At the ball, she had spoken of her husband's death with no regret. Perhaps it was the odiousness of her first match that had made her protest his own offer so vehemently.

Geoffrey glanced at the other side of the theater, the boxes arranged in tidy rows like the cells of a beehive while their occupants buzzed quietly. He did not know for certain which box belonged to the Aldines, but he could see no faces resembling that of Lady Worlington. And yet, despite his own doubts that she would attend and despite Will's scant encouragement, his eyes refused to stop scanning the stalls for signs of her.

On stage, the soldiers began to devise a plot to test their fair ladies' fidelity, and by the light of a dozen hanging chandeliers, Geoffrey saw a woman wearing a dark sheath of purple enter the box directly opposite him. It was Lady Worlington, her hair pulled up in a Grecian style and a large jeweled collar adorning her neck. Geoffrey watched her step down into the box on the arm of a thick-set fellow while another lady—probably Lady Aldine—followed behind. Geoffrey squinted, trying to make out who the gentleman was in the box opposite. He caught the flash of rings on the man's hand—Stapleton Aldine.

The arias continued. The high soprano began to grate on Geoffrey's nerves. He wished, at that moment, that he carried a quizzing glass or monocle to better make out what was transpiring in the box opposite. "Opera glasses, if you please," he said to Helena, who was whispering happily in Will's ear, oblivious to the performance. She handed Geoffrey her reticule, and he removed the glasses and trained them, not on the stage, but on the far side of the room.

A few minutes' observation showed that Stapleton Aldine was sitting far too close to Lady Worlington. Geoffrey grimaced as he saw the man's nose repeatedly nuzzling her face as he bent in to discuss the opera...or other matters. Lady Worlington's own face was set in an inscrutable mask. Geoffrey could count on one hand the number of smiles that surfaced on her lips over the next hour.

Intermission came and went, opera goers filtered in and out of their boxes, but as the second act of the opera began, Geoffrey noted

that Lady Worlington had not returned to her seat. Without fully formulating a plan, he stood up in the box. “Cecil,” he said quietly, “will you keep an eye out for my sister? I need some air.”

The country squire nodded.

Geoffrey slipped out into the corridor and made his way to the other side of the theater.

It did not take him long to spot Lady Worlington, seated on a bench in the corridor outside her own box, fanning herself with her program. Geoffrey seated himself on the opposite side of the bench, leaving enough room for three wide matrons to sit between them. Without looking at her, he spoke out to the empty corridor. “Why is it always too warm in these places in the winter? They overheat it to ward off the chill, and then when two thousand warm bodies enter the room, it is all but unbearable.”

“It is the tyranny of slender women,” said Lady Worlington. “They are always cold and demand that the braziers be stoked, while the rest of us who are more than skin and bones, are quite warm already.”

“Aptly put, Lady Worlington.” Geoffrey had already noted several days ago that Lady Worlington’s curves covered her bones quite admirably. “And barring the excessive heat, how are you enjoying the performance?”

She put down her program and stared at him. “In truth, Lord Tilbury, I find it rather stifling.”

“Perhaps it is not the opera but the company.”

“And what company would that be, your grace? Have you been observing my box?”

“Yes, quite thoroughly the last hour or so.”

“You are bold.” Her dark eyes sent out sparks of fire at his admission.

“Or simply bored—I have seen this opera twice before.” He paused as an elderly couple, too tired to stay for the closing scenes, passed by the bench in the corridor. Geoffrey saw the old fellow’s hand on his wife’s waist, guiding her gently down the hall—he could not help stealing a glance at Lady Worlington’s trim waist, swathed in imperial purple, her shoulders rising out of a deep V-shaped neckline.

Geoffrey edged closer on the bench. “Would it be too bold to admit that I was desperate to see you here tonight?”

“Entirely.” Lady Worlington stood up, and Geoffrey rose to his feet as well. “I should return to my box,” she said. “They will be missing me.”

“Is your cousin Stapleton an opera devotee?” asked Geoffrey lightly.

Lady Worlington’s eyelashes fluttered down over a set of wary eyes. Geoffrey could see that her cousin was not a subject she meant to discuss. “Not overly.”

“Perhaps I could assist you with the Italian then.” He gestured to the program she was holding which bore the lyrics from several of the arias.

“Your grace is *ever so kind*,”—she was being sardonic now—“but I am fluent in the language.”

“I would expect nothing less from you, my lady.”

She turned away, going back to the curtain that led to her opera box.

“Do you miss your cousin’s company so much?” demanded Geoffrey, his annoyance overtaking his good sense.

Lady Worlington froze. “How dare you, your grace! What gives you the right to discuss whom I choose to keep company with?”

“I have no right,” said Geoffrey hurriedly. “But all the same—a word of advice. I told you I had made inquiries about your family. I have it on good authority that your cousin Stapleton is flying without a feather.”

Lady Worlington swiveled round, allowing him a full view of her collarbone and its decoration. She took a step closer to Geoffrey. “These emeralds I received from my cousin would seem to belie your statement.”

“It would surprise me greatly to learn that they were real.”

“What kind of fool would give a lady paste gems?”

“A pompous fool who thinks he can bluff his way into the banns before she finds out.”

Lady Worlington tilted her chin upwards and looked him full in the eyes. “Egads, your grace! Methinks you are a very jealous youth.”

He wanted to reach out and take her chin between his thumb and forefinger, but he refrained. “I assure you, my lady, jealousy does not stem solely from youth. But you are right.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “I *am* jealous.”

It was nearly midnight again, albeit in a well-lit opera house instead of a dark stairwell. He stared at her pink lips, his blood calling up that moment two nights ago beneath the mistletoe. Lady Worlington’s lips parted slightly, and he could see that she remembered as well.

He reached out for her hand, and surprisingly, she allowed him to take it. “May I call on you tomorrow?” He brought the gloved fingers up to his lips.

With her other hand, Lady Worlington lifted her program and began to fan herself with the paper. “I think it would be more prudent, your grace, if you did *not*.”

“But is not imprudence a quality of youth?” he retorted and then left it at that. If she did not forbid him to call, he would take that as permission.

She took back her hand and retreated to the curtained door. “I will not be able to make head or tails of the storyline. I must have missed an entire scene by now.”

“I shall fill you in on any lacunas tomorrow,” promised Geoffrey.

She shook her head, and a small smile played upon her lips. “You are incorrigible, Lord Tilbury. Good night.”

“Good night,” he replied, waiting until the deep purple of her dress fully disappeared before he walked back down the corridor to find his own box.

O

“AN’ HOW WAS the opera?” asked Perkins, yawning. She had fallen asleep while waiting for Maud to come home but awakened now to unpin her mistress’ hair and help her disrobe.

“Tedious,” said Maud shortly, summarizing only part of the experience. The interlude with Geoffrey Angiers had not been tedious. It had been—oh, she hardly knew what to call it!

The maid unfastened the clasp of the necklace with the giant emeralds. “Lawks! Where should I be keeping this, my lady? I would not want to be responsible if’n it should go missing.”

Maud wrinkled her nose as she stared at the necklace. The duke’s comments had been niggling at her all the way home in the carriage. “Do you think these emeralds are real, Perkins?”

“That’s more than I could say, although tomorrow, if’n the sun does ever make its way through the gray, we can hold them up in the light and see if there’s any green fire inside. Either that, or you can take them to a jeweler, my lady, to know for sure.”

“Oh, I don’t know if I dare do that, but perhaps Ralph….” Maud shook her head at the thought—she had been taking up far too much of Ralph’s time already. But still, she wanted to know whether the

emeralds were paste—and what about Tilbury's assertion that Stapleton was flying without a feather?

She had always assumed that her cousin lived as comfortably as most gentlemen of her acquaintance. But then, perhaps she should examine that assumption more carefully. A generation ago, the bulk of the Aldine inheritance along with the title of viscount had passed down to her own father, as elder brother, while Stapleton's father Frederick was passed over with only a token sum, which meant that Stapleton had received little to nothing as his patrimony.

The estate was entailed to the male line; there was always a remote chance of it passing out of the current branch of the family, but the likelihood of Will dying before his father was small. And now that he was listed in the banns with Helena, it might not be long before Will secured himself an heir.

And yet, even without a large inheritance, Stapleton had positioned himself to come into money. He had married early and well, to the heiress Lady Dorothea Hamilton. Their wedding day, twenty years ago, was one of Maud's earliest childhood memories—how she had loved the flower garland that Aunt Dorothea had given her to wear.

Will had been a baby at the time, not yet able to walk. She remembered her Uncle Frederick, a glass of brandy in hand, standing over Will's basket at the wedding. "And you brat,"—he had said, "are the nail in the coffin of all our hopes."

"Why, what do you mean, Uncle Frederick?" Maud had asked, but her uncle had not answered. It was not until years later that Maud realized how galling Will's birth must have been for him. His brother Harry had not married until well past the prime of life, and for so many years, Frederick had fed himself with the expectation that one day, at his brother's passing, he would be a wealthy viscount in his own right.

Uncle Frederick had certainly not died rich—Maud would be surprised if he bequeathed Stapleton anything but debts. And if Stapleton had frittered away his wife's money, it was possible he could be cleaned out at this juncture. Maud reflected that she was unapprised of her cousin's spending habits. He might be a gambler, for all she knew—although he had shown no interest in whist on Christmas Day.

What if he *were* on the rocks? Maud sat down wearily in the chair as Perkins began to unpin her coiffure. It would explain his sudden

interest in her. No one, besides Ralph, was aware that Victor was withholding her annuity—no one was aware that Lady Worlington would enter a new marriage with little more than the fashionable clothes on her back. Was Stapleton planning to assume her assumed income to put a little wind into his sails?

"Perkins," said Maud, trying to hold back a yawn, "tomorrow I must visit a jeweler. Will you accompany me?"

"Of course, my lady," said Perkins, running a brush through her mistress' hair.

Maud breathed deeply. It was a blessing to have at least one ally in London—even if it were only her maid. But how much longer would that friendship last? Maud wrinkled her nose, recollecting that if she did not get her financial affairs put to rights soon, she would have nothing with which to pay Perkins' salary. The only way out of this tangle was for Victor Worlington to have a change of heart or for Maud to make an advantageous marriage without delay. And since the former would take a miracle, perhaps it was better to focus on the latter….

The Fourth Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 11

Maud handed her bonnet and cloak to Perkins to take upstairs, rubbing her hands to warm them in the drafty entrance hall. The visit to the jeweler had proved most informative, and Maud knew she must decide soon on how to proceed.

"A parcel came for you, milady," said the butler.

The fresh scent of the box revealed its contents even before Maud undid the string and the wrapping. Inside were five firm yellow lemons. Four looked fresh from the tree, but upon closer examination, Maud could see that the center one had the mark of a knife across its middle. She picked it up and the two halves of the yellow citrus fell apart, revealing a sparkling green center. Maud nearly gasped aloud. Inside the lemon was a large emerald. Even in the dim light of the hall, she could see the green fire that hid in its depths.

"Fullerton," she said, addressing the butler. "Was there a card to go with this?"

"Indeed, my lady." The butler searched on the tray until he found Lord Tilbury's calling card. Maud took it in her hands and turned it over. On the back was scrawled this epigram:

Who would distinguish foul from fair
Must false with true just once compare.

Clearly, the poem was an allusion to the emerald—and to the necklace that Maud had worn last night at the theater. The green glow of the single gem burned brighter the more she looked at it. It was her second confirmation this morning that Stapleton's necklace was all show and no substance.

The butler cleared his throat. "The duke said he will call later this afternoon, my lady."

A small smile played over Maud's lips. Lord Tilbury was nothing if not persistent. His refusal to take no for an answer was as endearing as it was frustrating.

Well, what if he did call? She would have to admit to him that he

was right about Stapleton.

And would he renew those sentiments that he had expressed last night at the King's Theatre? A part of her wished he would.

She took a cloth and wiped the lemon juice off the emerald, cradling the magnificent cut stone in the palm of her hand. It was all well and good to prove Stapleton false, but would Geoffrey Angiers be as true as this green gem? Jealousy was easily provoked, lust was easily kindled, but love was a fire that must be maintained over years and decades.

Maud's lips parted in a sigh. She did not know the duke well enough to judge his constancy. And in her experience, the young did not know their own minds well enough to make a decision of such import.

Still, she could not suppress a tremor of excitement as she went upstairs to dress for afternoon callers. It was pleasant to have a suitor, albeit a young one, after so many years of an ill-suited marriage. She would ask Perkins to dress her hair with special care.

○

AFTER ANOTHER EXHILARATING bout at Angelo's, Geoffrey sat down panting on the bench, leaning forward to regain his breath and cool down his face. He had been too confident with his opening sally, and his opponent's defense had been impossible to pierce. But then, when the fellow made a misguided lunge, Geoffrey had been able to parry and riposte to good effect, winning the bout to the acclaim of the spectators.

He wiped away a slick trail of sweat from his temple and wondered if Lady Worlington had returned home yet. He had not been able to resist dropping off the lemons—with their hidden gem—before the normal calling hours. It was well into the afternoon now, though, and time for him to call again. Just one more moment to rest his spent limbs, and then he would head home to bathe.

"Lord Tilbury, isn't it?"

Geoffrey looked at the slight, red-haired man, plainly dressed in a dark coat. He was out of place here at Angelo's, but Geoffrey could not decipher what place he came from. "I'm afraid you have the advantage of me."

"Jacob Pevensey at your service, your grace, attached to the Bow Street Magistrates' Office."

Geoffrey was instantly on his guard. “And how can I help you, Mr. Pevensey?”

The man’s freckled face came closer, implying that the words he was about to convey were not for common consumption. “There has been an increase of illegal dueling as of late, and the magistrates find it a cause for concern.”

“I see.” Geoffrey tried to keep his voice neutral. “And what exactly does that have to do with me?”

“Reports say that your grace was involved in a duel last week.”

“How curious!” replied Geoffrey, running a hand through his sweaty curls. “And where did this alleged duel occur?”

“Just north of Camden Town.” The Bow Street Runner had pulled out his notebook and a pencil. Apparently, this interview was an official one.

“And with whom am I supposed to have dueled?”

“I was hoping that your grace could provide the answer to that question.” Pevensey’s pencil began to scritch-scratch across the paper of his notebook.

Geoffrey felt an inestimable sense of relief. So, the story had *not* got about in full. “I admit to nothing, Mr. Pevensey, and in the absence of a duel taking place, I can hardly identify the man I am alleged to have dueled with.”

“I had an inkling you might say that, your grace.” The Runner’s freckled face lit up at the challenge. He put his notebook and pencil back in the pocket of his jacket. “Well then, consider this fair warning that your actions are under investigation.” He lifted his beaver and gave a slight bow. “I would suggest steering clear of Camden Town in the near future.”

“I thank you for the advice,” said Geoffrey, starting to feel the cold air attack his sweat-soaked shirt. “Good day, Mr. Pevensey.”

The red-haired investigator slipped out through the crowd of Corinthians, and Geoffrey watched him narrowly until he was out the door completely.

“Have no worries,” said a friendly voice in his ear. “*Bien sûr*, I told him nothing.”

Geoffrey looked down at his sturdy companion, the Marquis de Montesquerrat. “That is good, since there is nothing to tell.”

“You did not kill the man, eh?”

“Certainly not.”

“Good, good. One can be more careful with the blades. With the

pistols—sometimes the bullet goes astray."

"Which is why I prefer the sword."

The marquis pointed at Geoffrey's long arms and tsked. "*Eh bien*, if I had the span of an albatross, I should duel with swords as well!" His voice lowered. "I am a little offended that you did not choose me as your second, *mon ami*."

Geoffrey shook his head in disbelief. "It was a delicate matter, Louis, and I involved no second at all. There was no need for another party to know the facts."

"Ah, so it *was* over *une femme*," said the marquis triumphantly.

"Indeed, but I shall let you speculate no further." He gripped the Frenchman's forearm. "But I promise you, if I ever duel again, I shall make you my second straightway."

The marquis grinned and seized his hand. "I shall look forward to it! And none of these easy-to-spot fields by Camden Town—I shall find you a more secure location where those nosy Runners will never know to look."

"Yes, but I am determined to have no more duels for at least a fortnight," said Geoffrey, trying to tame his friend's eagerness.

"*Oui*." The marquis' thick eyebrows lifted. "But it is always best to be prepared."

O

"MY LADY, YOU have a caller," said Fullerton.

Seated at the window, Maud was sketching a solitary crow on the white cornice of a neighboring roof. It was a far different setting than the wilds of Devon, but something about the angular architecture, and the black against the white, appealed to her. She looked up and smiled. "Lord Tilbury, I presume?"

"Sir Victor Worlington," replied the butler, and at those three words, Maud's face turned to ash.

"Tell him I am not at home."

"Oh, but I know better than to believe such taradiddles," said a reedy voice.

Maud tried to control the shaking of her extremities as Victor Worlington slid into the room on the butler's heels. It was an even more unwelcome intrusion than Lord Tilbury's entrance two mornings ago.

Fullerton froze in position, awaiting her instructions. "You may

go," said Maud, dismissing him. It would be no help to have a domestic witness her exchange with Victor, and the butler could do nothing to force her stepson to leave. "Oh, and Fullerton," said Maud, right before the butler crossed the threshold, "please let my mother know we have guests." Her mother's presence, perhaps, could afford her some protection.

"May I sit?" Without waiting for her answer, Victor came over to the window and took the chair opposite her. He was a large man, his frame fully filling the seat, his wide boots planted firmly on the floor. "You are looking in fine health. London agrees with you, my dear Mama."

Maud breathed in sharply. Two years her senior, Victor never lost the opportunity to allude to their unusual relationship. "What do you want?" she demanded.

"Tsk, tsk," said Victor. "So coarse. Pleasantries first, and then down to business."

"But I find nothing pleasant about your company," said Maud, "and I would prefer to rid myself of it as soon as possible. I repeat myself—what do you want?" The violence of her own words surprised her. It seemed that the small respite of a week away from him had returned her confidence more than she had known.

Victor's eyebrows rose. His lips pursed a little as he looked around the room, taking in the ornate clock on the mantelpiece, the Italian landscapes on the wall, and the intricate molding crisscrossing the ceiling. His eyes came to rest on Maud. Her red bodice was elaborate for a day dress, and the gauzy white skirt attached to it accentuated the curves of her figure. His nostrils flared as he stared at the pearl necklace around her soft throat. "How did you enjoy the opera last night?" asked Sir Victor with a self-satisfied sneer.

"The opera? How do you know I was there?" Maud sucked in a queasy breath. Just as he had in the village near Hum's estate, Victor was setting himself to track all her movements. Had he been spying on her in her box? In the hallway as she spoke to Lord Tilbury?

His next question came quickly, as if he had read her thoughts. "Who is this Lord Tilbury you are expecting today?"

Maud's stomach churned. She hoped that her face did not wear her guilt as plainly as her heart. The last thing she wanted was for Victor to show an interest in Tilbury. "Oh, no one of importance," she said, waving off the question with nonchalance. "A soon-to-be relation of my brother's. Will is engaged to Tilbury's sister Helena. I was

expecting Helena and her brother to call today."

"A lengthy explanation for 'no one of importance,'" said Victor, his high voice imitating her own almost perfectly.

Maud sat silently, her lips in a tight line, refusing to engage him any further.

"You ask me what I want," said Victor. "Only to pay a friendly call. I have recently come into some funds,"—he smirked at this —"and am here to visit my father's banker—*my* banker now—to ensure they are properly invested."

"It is not right for you to withhold my jointure," said Maud, unable to endure his gloating.

"Just as it was not right for you to make love to the curate behind my father's back."

Maud quailed. Would she never be able to forget that imprudence? Not as long as the accuser was determined to keep it fresh in her mind.

"I am come to ensure you are still respecting my father's memory. No dallying with curates here, you little hussy. Or perhaps you would like to return to Devon with me so I can school you again on how a dowager baroness ought to behave?"

Maud's heart began to pound wildly. Go back to Devon? Never! Let him ruin her first before she lived trapped like a rabbit in a viper's den. But just as swiftly, the thought of how terrible that ruin could be overwhelmed her resolve.

The door to the drawing room swung open as Lady Aldine entered. "Sir Victor!" she said graciously, offering the guest her hand as he stood to greet her. "I am sorry I was not here to receive you, but I trust you and Maud had much to catch up on."

"Indeed," he said, casting Maud a sly look. "Your daughter has just been expressing how much she misses Devon."

"Ah, yes," said Lady Aldine brightly, taking a seat and gesturing for Victor to resume his, "after seven years in a place, one can build a whole new life. I do not doubt that Maud misses the place and the people. Perhaps she can visit in the spring."

"We would all like that very much," said Victor, his high voice gliding over the syllables effortlessly. "Perhaps others of your family would like to visit as well. Your cousin Stapleton Aldine looks to be a man of many parts. We've yet to be introduced, but I should very much like to be."

Maud cringed inwardly—what did he know about Stapleton?—and

just when she thought the situation could get no worse, Fullerton entered the room to announce another guest.

"Lord Tilbury, your ladyship."

"Ah, send him in," said Lady Aldine while Maud began to quake inwardly. Both of these callers held secrets that she would be mortified to have revealed. She hoped that propriety would keep the conversation dull and her peccadilloes undisclosed.

Fullerton exited and was soon replaced by the golden-haired duke. Maud observed that he had learned his lesson and waited to be announced this time before entering.

"Lord Tilbury," said Lady Aldine, standing once again to offer him her hand. "How delightful to see you again!"

Maud felt Victor's hooded eyes watching her, scrutinizing, judging, and in that moment, she knew she had to act.

O

"WHY, WHERE IS Helena?" Lady Worlington asked sweetly, walking over to welcome Geoffrey alongside her mother. "She promised to call on us this afternoon."

Geoffrey refrained from raising an eyebrow. It had been he, not Helena, who had made that promise. But clearly, Lady Worlington did not want that fact made known. "No doubt a misunderstanding," he said smoothly. "She had gone out by the time I returned home from fencing, and so I took the liberty of coming on without her." He looked around the room, adding verisimilitude to the story. "I see she has not arrived ahead of me."

"No," said Lady Aldine, "but I must introduce you to our guest." She led Geoffrey over to the window where a large fellow with a round, German-looking face was rising from his seat. "This is Sir Victor Worlington, son of Maud's late husband."

Geoffrey bowed curtly. "A pleasure." He could see the other fellow sizing him up before bowing perfunctorily as well. So, this was Maud Worlington's stepson. There was nothing boyish about him. He was nearly thirty and sturdy as an ox.

"Do you hail from Devon?" Geoffrey asked.

"Yes," said Sir Victor, his voice pitched higher than one would expect for a man of his girth. "I came to town for business, but I thought I would call on my dear relatives, however briefly." He walked over to the ladies to take his farewell, following the rules of

politeness that dictated one caller must leave when a new caller arrived.

Geoffrey watched him take Lady Aldine's hand and then Lady Worlington's, holding the second set of fingers a little longer than was strictly necessary. "We must discuss a date for your visit, my dear Maud, for as your mother says, you are sorely missed in Devon." Sir Victor wet his lips with his tongue, staring far too intently at his stepmother's face. "Perhaps I shall organize a house party soon. Would you like that?"

Lady Worlington returned the stare, her usually fluid conversation dried up at the source. Geoffrey saw an indefinable emotion register in her dark eyes. Fear? Longing? Still, Lady Worlington said nothing, leaving her mother to make the necessary pleasantries about how welcome such an event would be. And then Sir Victor took his leave, exiting the drawing room with the briefest of nods to Geoffrey.

"You are just in time for tea," said Lady Aldine, ringing the bell to have some muffins brought in. "And perhaps Helena will join us soon."

Lady Worlington was still staring into the distance where Sir Victor's back had disappeared, as if she had seen an apparition and was trying to discover whether it was real.

"Did you receive the lemons?" asked Geoffrey, trying to bring some lightness to the conversation.

"Yes," said Lady Worlington, snapping out of her trance. "Very kind of you to send them over for Will since he enjoys them so much in his tea."

Geoffrey grinned. Once again, she was trying to pretend the parcel he had sent was not for her and her alone. He wondered if she had found the cut lemon with its hidden treasure. "I think you'll find you enjoy the fruit yourself if you care to sample them."

"Oh, I did already." Lady Worlington's eyes met his. The two of them both looked over to Lady Aldine and saw her employed at the tea table with setting out the tea cups and the plates. Without a word, Lady Worlington walked over to the window, and Geoffrey followed her, admiring her glossy dark hair and the sway of her hips as she moved.

Lying askew on the window seat was a drawing pad with a half-finished sketch of a crow resting on the corner of a building. And beside that was a little velvet bag, just the size to hold a pair of earrings or a bracelet.

Lady Worlington picked up the bag and handed it to Geoffrey. He crushed it gently in his hand and felt the hard edges of the emerald he had sent.

"Returning this so soon?" he asked.

"It has already done its work," she replied. "I see no reason to keep it."

"And shall the other stones be returned as well?" he asked, lowering his voice. "Although I daresay you shall tell me that is no business of mine."

"How well you know me."

"I should like to know you better," he murmured, but forbore from pressing the point.

"Sugar?" asked Lady Aldine brightly, and Geoffrey took that as confirmation that their hurried *tête-à-tête* must come to an end.

"No, thank you," he said, advancing to the tea table to claim his cup. He waited until the ladies had their tea and then they all removed to the sofa and chairs surrounding the fireplace.

"That was kind of Sir Victor to call," said Lady Aldine cheerfully. "I don't believe I've seen him in years—perhaps since your wedding, Maud. He's much grown, of course. I hardly recognized him but for his voice, and of course the last time I saw him he was in a red coat."

"I'm sorry to have cut the visit short with my arrival," said Geoffrey, but he noticed that Maud responded to neither her mother's comment nor his. Her eyes had taken on a hard cast, a barrier of obsidian to repel all inquiry.

Lady Aldine patted her daughter's hand. "I am sorry—Victor's visit must be putting you in mind of Devon. I'm sure you had many friends there you are missing."

Lady Worlington removed her hand from her mother's touch. "No, Mama. Not at all. And we must not bore Lord Tilbury with talking about people he knows nothing about. Did you hear, Mama? He was at the theater last night, just as we were. And Will and Helena too! You must tell him what you thought of the performance."

And so Geoffrey and Lady Aldine passed the rest of the requisite half hour discussing the intrigue and arias of the Mozart opera, while Lady Worlington carefully kept the conversation from herself, and Geoffrey kept half an eye on her at all times, not certain whether to be more worried about her current connection to Stapleton Aldine or her past connection to Sir Victor Worlington.

O

WHEN MAUD WENT upstairs to dress for dinner, she found Lucy Perkins half-wrapped in the curtains of the long bedroom window, staring into the street outside.

"Perkins?"

"Lawks, my lady!" said the maid, pulling back from the paneled glass. "There's someone watching the house, there is."

Maud took in a sharp breath. "Who is it?" She joined Perkins in peering from behind the curtain. Below them near the street was a tall man in a drab greatcoat, hands in his pockets, leaning against the wrought-iron fence. Maud could barely make out the lines of his face, but there was certainly something familiar about the way the man stood.

"If that isn't Jeremiah Bradstreet, I'll put a pin in my hat," stated Perkins.

They both stared, gaining certainty that the watcher was none other than Victor Worlington's valet from Devon. It was confirmation—the note delivered to Maud at Gunter's was no coincidence. His mention of seeing her at the opera was no happenstance. Victor Worlington *was* spying on her. Perhaps he hoped to ferret out some other indiscretions to hold over her along with the letter. A pity for him there was nothing to find.

Or was there? Victor had been markedly suspicious of Lord Tilbury's arrival for tea. If he should find out what had transpired between Maud and the duke, he would construe it in the worst possible light. Indeed, it might even precipitate the publishing of that unfortunate letter he had in his possession. Maud took a deep breath. As long as Worlington's man was watching the house, it was imperative that Geoffrey Angiers keep his distance.

The Fifth Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 12

Geoffrey woke early as usual and was just leaving the house to visit his solicitor when a hand-delivered note arrived. The footman in Aldine livery as well as the "M" on the wax impression made him hopeful as to the sender. He unfolded the paper quickly only to have his suppositions confirmed at the same time as his hopes were dashed.

Lord Tilbury,

If you have any kindness for me, please refrain from sending any more letters and parcels or paying any more calls.

In all sincerity,
Lady Worlington

Geoffrey read the letter thrice through before crumpling it up with a groan. What had he done to deserve such banishment? His fingers itched to dash off a reply even though that was what Lady Worlington had expressly forbidden. What had happened between the night of the opera and the news of this morning? Either he had offended Lady Worlington with his emerald and his epigram or someone—Victor Worlington?—had turned her wholly against him.

He gritted his teeth. Perhaps he should cancel his appointment with his solicitor and vent some of his spleen with the small sword at Angelo's. He took a long breath. No, he would not let his pride prove master of his good sense. He had others to think of besides himself, and this morning's business was better done now than put off until later.

He left the carriage for Helena, should she desire to go shopping again with Miss Cecil, and boarded a hackney for St. James's Place. After an hour or more of discussion, and the furious scratching of the legal secretary's pen, he was ready to bring a document to young William Aldine's solicitor and soon found himself climbing the steps of a neighboring office.

“A good but chilly morning to you,” he said to Ralph Aldine, doffing his beaver and greatcoat as he entered the young solicitor’s study. “I have a draft of Helena’s marriage settlement for you to examine if you are at leisure and then present to your father and brother.”

“Of course,” said Ralph, dismissing his own secretary and inviting Geoffrey to take a seat.

He sat down at his desk, his eyes flicking back and forth across the page while his tongue made a soft clicking noise as he came to each successive clause.

“So,” he said, “the amount to be settled on her is seventy thousand pounds?”

“Exactly,” said Geoffrey. “However, I want it secured in such a way that it shall be passed to her heirs and not be able to be touched by her husband.”

“And her allowance is to come from the interest?”

“Quarterly, as stated.”

Ralph nodded and continued reading. “Well, it is very thoroughly drawn up, and though it does not provide for any exigencies should William’s own income run dry, it is a fair proposal, and I will present it to him in a way that he will not complain. Your sister certainly deserves as much.”

Geoffrey leaned back in his chair. “Is there any danger of Will’s income running dry?”

Ralph raised an eyebrow. “God forfend, but I simply must consider all possibilities.”

“Hmm, yes.” Geoffrey had made inquiries about his future brother-in-law, but they had turned up nothing too reprehensible. Moderate gambling debts, a few questionable connections, but then, perhaps he had not dug deeply enough. “Are there any regular—or perhaps I should say *irregular*—draws on William’s income that I should know about?”

Ralph shuffled the papers. “I am not at liberty to discuss my client’s personal matters with others.”

Geoffrey had expected as much. “You are adept at managing your brother’s affairs so that he falls on his feet.”

“Do you fault me for it?”

Geoffrey shook his head. “And yet, you seem closer to your sister than your brother.”

Ralph shrugged. “What can I say? We are closer in age, and in

temperament, I find."

"Tell me," said Geoffrey, affecting an air of nonchalance. "Do you find your sister much changed after spending seven years away from London?"

Ralph's eyebrows rose. "As changed as anyone else in her position would be. She was little more than a girl when she left. She is a woman now, with knowledge of the world and knowledge of herself."

"Was she happy with old Worlington?"

Ralph dropped the settlement on the desk. "I beg your pardon, your grace, but that is a question one hardly puts to a lady that is not a relative."

"I did not put the question to her," said Geoffrey. "I put it to you. And surely, we can claim the excuse of some small relationship now that our siblings are to wed."

Ralph hesitated. "The relationship is still distant. And if I were the head of my family, your grace, I would not only decline to answer your questions, but also demand your intentions concerning my sister."

"Why?" asked Geoffrey. "What has she said?"

"Enough," said Ralph. His eyes, though not accusing, were certainly stern.

Geoffrey breathed deeply. So—both of Lady Worlington's brothers now knew of his impulsive behavior. At the moment, however, that mattered far less to him than the possibility of gaining insight into Lady Worlington's heart.

"Did she tell you I made her an offer?"

"She did mention it."

"But she declined."

"So I heard." Ralph seemed almost amused. "Did that prick your pride, Tilbury? Or was it in fact your heart?"

"A little of both, I'm afraid," said Geoffrey. If he were to get any truths out of Ralph, he would have to be forthcoming with truths of his own. "Since she told as much to you, she must have told you her reasons. Why did she decline?"

"My sister is not eager to be forced into matrimony."

Geoffrey waited, hoping Ralph would go on. The solicitor squinted up at the ceiling, and then, seeming to have made a decision, focused his eyes back on his visitor.

"It is as you divined earlier…she was not happy in her first marriage. She came to regret it later."

“And she thinks she will regret a second marriage just as readily?”

“Quite the opposite. She thinks that *you* will regret it. She is too old for you—as Worlington was too old for her. You would grow tired of her.”

Geoffrey snorted. “And because she did not know her own mind at eighteen, I do not know my own mind at one and twenty?”

“Exactly.” Ralph cocked his head. “Which is not to say that I think the same. I believe you an honorable man, your grace, and I am trusting you by revealing so much.”

“I think you already know just how discreet I can be. I thank you for your revelations. And in return, I shall confide that I mean to offer for her again, and again, until she sees sense.” He paused. “The one rub is that, as of this morning, she has forbidden me to call on her.”

“Then I advise patience,” said Ralph. “The best proof of constancy is time.”

“I agree,” said Geoffrey. “But at the same time, I must convince her I am in earnest before that stepson of hers persuades her to leave London and return to Devon.”

Ralph leaned forward. “Stepson? You mean Victor Worlington?”

“Yes, he was at the house when I called yesterday.”

Ralph scowled. “And that, your grace, is another fly in the ointment that no one quite knows how to remove. But enough with sharing secrets that do not belong to me.” He picked up the papers and quartered them with neat folds. “I shall put this settlement before Will and my father and give you news shortly on its reception.”

“I thank you,” said Geoffrey, standing to take his leave. “And if the occasion should present itself, I beg you to put in a good word for me with your sister.”

O

AFTER DISPATCHING HER note to Lord Tilbury, Maud spent a pensive morning finishing her sketch of the crow on the cornice. The detailed shading of each feather and the outlining of each brick on the house helped her escape her oppressive thoughts for a time, but the relief could not last forever. Soon, the sketch was finished, and she was back to worrying about the predicaments that entangled her.

One predicament in particular—Victor’s visit—so overshadowed her mind that she had little space to think on the problem presented by Stapleton’s faux-emeralds or the perplexing persistence of Lord

Tilbury's interest. What had Victor meant about inviting her to a house party in Devon? Maud shuddered. She would not go back. She could not.

"Why so glum, Maud?" asked Lady Aldine, directing a footman to carry her large tambour-work frame into the drawing room. She took a seat on the sofa and began to sort through her box of threads to find the correct color. "Perhaps you should pay some calls on old friends. Emma Wedgwood and you were once quite close, and even though she is Lady Fremont now, I am sure she has not forgotten you. There is an assembly tonight you could attend. I'm sure there are many who will be happy to have you back in town."

"I hardly think so, Mother." Maud meandered over to the sofa and took a seat beside Lady Aldine. She was still a little cross with her mother for refusing to stand up to her father where Stapleton was concerned, but not cross enough to spurn her company entirely. "It has been seven years, and I have kept up with none of them. I am sure that all the girls who came out the same year I did have husbands, children…."

"You are feeling sorry for yourself," said Lady Aldine, selecting a sage green thread and pulling it through the taut fabric with her hook. "I know how that is, my dear. I begin to feel lonely, and so I refuse to see anyone, and the more I refuse to see anyone, the lonelier I feel."

"Are you lonely often?" asked Maud, seeing her mother through new eyes.

"Every now and again," said her mother. "You must know by now, that your father is not exactly the most engaging companion. But I have made my bed, and I choose to be cheerful about it. If he does not like teas, and parties, and assemblies, why then I can go to them myself and find friendship elsewhere."

Maud sighed. "Oh, Mother, what fools we both were, to marry men a generation older than us!"

Lady Aldine looked up from her chain of neat stitches. There was no recognizable pattern on the cloth yet. "Fools? Hardly. We were prudent, my dear. We chose security over sentiment, and I have no regrets over my choice. Your father may be querulous, but he is not quarrelsome. He may be wearisome, but he is not a wastrel. I am as happy with your father as I deserve to be." She inserted the hook into the cloth. "I can see that you feel differently on the matter."

"Indeed," said Maud. As much as she had tried, she had never truly been able to escape the discontentment that had beset her in

Devon. It had never occurred to her that another woman, in the same situation, could reconcile herself to it. “You say you have no regrets, but would you say the same when you were my age? Trapped into being an old man’s nursemaid while you are still eager to put on your dancing shoes?”

“I think,” Lady Aldine said slowly, as she ended one chain and began another, “that I should have felt the same as you, if it had not been for one thing: *you* were my saving grace. You were born only a year after our marriage, and I was so consumed with being your mother, that I forgot to be consumed with anything else. And then… what can I say? I grew older. I became accustomed to the situation. It became—oh, how to put it?—comfortable.”

She looked up at Maud, a little nervously. “Do you still feel… trapped, Maudie?”

“You mean with Stapleton?”

“Yes, I know his interest came as quite a surprise.” Lady Aldine began to sort through her thread box again for a new color. “But I believe he has been discussing the possibility with your father for some time—”

“Does Father know that he hasn’t a sixpence to scratch with?” demanded Maud.

“What?” Lady Aldine nearly spilled the box of spools. “That’s quite coarse, Maud, and untrue as well.”

“I took that necklace to a jeweler yesterday.” Maud dropped her voice to a vehement whisper. “The emeralds are fakes.”

“That cannot be! Are you sure?”

“Mr. Abram was quite sure, and I’ve no reason to doubt his verdict.”

Lady Aldine began to tap her chin with the tip of her tambour hook. “There’s something suspicious afoot. I never did trust your cousin—he is too smooth, too ready to compliment and too eager to agree with everything one says.”

“Will you mention something to Father?”

Lady Aldine breathed in deeply. “I am not sure I would dare broach it. It has always vexed him that I never could take to Stapleton. Perhaps I can hint at it. Or maybe Ralph would be willing to say a word.”

“Poor Ralph!” said Maud with a little laugh. “We all rely on him so much.”

“Yes,” agreed Lady Aldine, laughing in agreement. “But how can

we help it when he is so…well, *reliable*!"

"I only hope that Stapleton does not do anything rash in the meantime." Maud stood up from the sofa and bumped against the tambour work frame.

"Such as make you an offer?" Lady Aldine put out a hand to steady the frame.

"Exactly," said Maud, "for whether I tell him I reject him for his poverty or I reject him for himself, I am afraid he will take neither one kindly."

Lady Aldine looked at her daughter thoughtfully and pursed her lips. "I believe he means to call tonight after dinner, so if I were you, Maud, I would go to that assembly."

CHAPTER 13

Geoffrey took the pale leaf between his thumb and forefinger and studied the discoloration. “What do you think it is, Max?”

The gardener squinted up at the glass ceiling and the gray clouds beyond. “Can’t be sunburn without any sun, your grace. The tree’s short of food, most likely.”

“I agree,” said Geoffrey. “We must see about improving the soil for all the orange trees. I can send a note over to Wedgwood at the Royal Horticultural Society and ask what soil supplements they recommend.”

He traced his hand down the trunk of the tree and dug his fingers into the brown dirt surrounding the roots. Pulling up a handful of the stuff, he examined it with furrowed brow.

“Geoffrey!”

The duke turned at the sound of his sister’s voice and let the handful of dirt fall back into the great clay planter which held the orange tree.

“I’ve asked the Cecils to dinner, and there’s an assembly afterward.”

“And I am to escort you?” asked Geoffrey with a smile.

“If you would be so obliging.”

“And you will abandon me for Will at the first opportunity?”

Helena waved one of her white hands elegantly. “Well, I shall try, but I don’t imagine you’ll let me.”

“Certainly not,” replied Geoffrey. He rubbed the residue of dirt on his palms onto the rough fabric of his buckskins. Clapping Max on the shoulder, he headed toward the door to the house. He took Helena’s hand and wrapped it around his arm as they walked down the hall together. “And I will not have you playing matchmaker again with your friend Miss Cecil. I shall dance with her once, and that is all.”

“Oh, very well then,” said Helena petulantly. “I am sorry that you do not affect her, but then again, I do not think she is taken with you either. It is all most vexing.”

“I am sorry to put you out,” said Geoffrey, letting go of Helena’s arm when they reached the bottom of the great staircase so she could ascend. “I suppose your plan was to distract me with some flirtatious beauty in hopes that I would pay less attention to *you*.”

“One of my cleverer plans,” said Helena, halting her ascent of the stairs and looking down at him over the banister. “But you are strikingly less eager to flirt with a flock of females than you used to be. What about Anthea Wedgwood? You enjoyed *her* wit last season.”

“Yes, when it was broken on others’ heads. I would hardly enjoy being the butt of it myself.” Geoffrey shrugged and was about to walk away when a thought came into his head. “I say, Helena! Have you mentioned it to Cook that the Cecils are coming to dinner?”

Helena halted on the landing. “Oh, I quite forgot.”

Geoffrey shook his head. “I suggest starting to remember such things. I do not intend to drop into your town house every morning to help manage domestic affairs.” He grinned. “But perhaps you are planning to dwell with the Viscount and Lady Aldine and cede all such responsibility to your mother-in-law?”

Helena gasped. “Live with Will’s parents? I never thought of such a thing. Lady Aldine is kind enough, but his father is quite frightening.”

“But you realize that Will has no establishment of his own. You must, of necessity, live with his family for a short time at least.”

Helena’s eyes darted around the large marble-floored saloon that led up to the staircase. She raised an eyebrow and looked at her brother.

“Certainly not!” said Geoffrey, in answer to her unspoken question. “I will not house William Aldine under my roof.”

“You would keep this monstrously large house all for yourself?” Helena’s fair face looked a little piqued at such selfishness.

“Perhaps I intend to marry as well.” Geoffrey grinned and waggled his own eyebrows at his sister.

“But we have just established that Edwina does not interest you, and you are averse to enduring the sparkling wit of Anthea Wedgwood. Whom can you possibly mean?” Helena gasped. “Why, can it be Lady Worlington?”

“Lady Worlington?” Geoffrey affected a tone of surprise. “What gives you that notion? She is older than me, is she not?” He scrutinized his sister carefully to see her reaction to the idea.

Helena waved a hand dismissively. “Not by much. And you seem to deal well together. You are both quite clever at games, and I’m sure

she is all the crack at managing things—unlike me. How delightful a notion, that we should be related twice over! You must act on it, Geoffrey."

"I doubt very much that she would consider me."

"You? 'Pon rep, Geoffrey, what a ridiculous statement! Any unmarried female would consider you most eligible—a duke with money, and a handsome one at that!"

Geoffrey hesitated, unsure whether to trust his sister with a view of his heart. In the end, he decided to approach the matter as a businessman, not a lover. "Perhaps you could sound her out. Find out if she 'affects me,' as you call it."

Helena's mouth fell open as she stared down at him over the banister. "Are you serious? I can see that you are!"

"And why not?" said Geoffrey gravely. If Lady Worlington was determined to avoid his company, he would send his sister to plead his case. "It is as you say—we seem to deal well together. Perhaps I ought to consider the match."

"Oh, Geoffrey!" said Helena. "You make it all sound so intellectual. Can't you tell if you feel anything for her? Any passion?"

"Passion?" echoed Geoffrey, remembering the press of Lady Worlington's lips against his own. "Why should that come into it? Better to exercise one's good sense in the matter, don't you think?" He lifted his eyebrows again, trying to keep his words from sounding too harsh. Helena certainly had not exercised sense where William Aldine was concerned. "But in any case, can I count on you to sound out whether Lady Worlington shows interest in me?"

"I suppose so," replied Helena. "Perhaps she will be at the assembly tonight. I'll speak to her."

"Discreetly," admonished Geoffrey.

"Discreetly," agreed Helena.

"And in return," he said, "I shall give Will some guidance on securing a snug house in the better part of town. I can see that, in your situation, it would be eminently desirable to have some distance from the viscount. There's less than a fortnight before the wedding, and he must act quickly if you are not to lodge with his parents in Grosvenor Square."

○

MAUD STRAIGHTENED HER back as she entered the assembly rooms on

Will's arm. Her mother's counsel had prevailed, and she had agreed to come tonight, to mingle with society, to renew acquaintances with old friends, and to make friendships with new ones. She had worn her red dress with the scalloped neckline, the same dress she had worn at the engagement ball when she had danced with Lord Tilbury.

Will had grumbled excessively when his mother asked him to escort Maud. It seems he had plans to go to the King's Theatre that night. "But you've already seen that opera!" objected his mother. "Weren't you just there with the Aldines the night Maud and I attended?"

Will had mumbled something about second viewings being better, but in the end, he begrudgingly agreed to attend the assembly with Maud. "Don't expect me to dance attendance on you all evening," he said sulkily as he handed her down out of the carriage.

"Of course not," said Maud, coolly. "You barely dance attendance on your fiancée—why should your sister expect better treatment?"

Will deserted her side as soon as the Master of Ceremonies had announced their names, but surprisingly his place was taken almost immediately by her elder brother, dressed smartly in pantaloons and a dark coat.

"Ralph! What are you doing here?"

He took her hand and kissed it gallantly. "You're not the only one who enjoys dancing, Maudie. And while I may not attain to the guest list at fancy balls in private homes, I can pay my assembly subscription just like everyone else. Will you save the first set of dances for me?"

"Certainly, for I know no one here, and if you had not turned up, I daresay I should just sit in a corner and fan myself for hours upon end."

"Ah, you underestimate yourself," said Ralph loyally. "I'm certain you will have many admirers present."

Out of the corner of her eye, Maud saw the Angiers entering the ballroom, Helena tall and willowy on the arm of her taller and undeniably handsome brother. The Cecils trailed behind them but moved off immediately to speak to some acquaintances at the far side of the room.

"Speak of the devil," said Ralph, giving a low whistle.

As her eyes took in Lord Tilbury's lithe figure, Maud felt her stomach give a leap. She had forbidden him to call on her or send her anymore parcels, but she had said nothing about dancing. Would he

avoid her entirely after her rudeness? Or would he seek her out? She scanned the room hastily but saw no signs of Victor. Surely, it would be safe to at least exchange a few words with Lord Tilbury.

The Angiers greeted Maud and Ralph with a good evening, Helena looking lovely in a diaphanous gown of pale blue lace.

"Enchanted," said Ralph, taking Helena's hand gallantly.

"As am I," said Lord Tilbury, bowing low over Maud's hand. Maud felt his touch linger on the fingertips of her gloves. He looked at her intently, and she refused to look away. Either he had omitted to read her note or it had done nothing to dissuade his interest.

"May I have the first two dances?"

"How kind of you to ask," said Maud, "but I am afraid I have just promised them to Ralph." She did not know whether to be dismayed or relieved that she had an excuse to give him.

Ralph smiled convivially. "If Lady Helena would do me the honor instead, I would be happy to cede my prior claim."

Maud stared at Ralph in surprise. He was fully aware of the awkwardness lying between her and Tilbury, and yet here he was throwing her into the duke's arms on the dance floor. What could he be thinking?

"Oh!" said Helena, a little vacuously. "I thank you, Mr. Aldine, but I really ought to look for Will."

"No need," said Maud. "He has just gone in to the card room, and I will lay a bet that he's joined a table for whist already."

"Are you a gambler then, Lady Worlington?" asked the duke mischievously.

"Not at all. I always lose at games of chance—something to do with the kind of cards I'm dealt."

Lord Tilbury raised an eyebrow, but before he could inquire further into just what cards were those, Ralph had resumed his request to Helena. "In Will's absence, I offer myself as a poor substitute." A hopeful look came into his eyes as he extended his arm.

"Very well then," said Helena tentatively.

Maud tried to catch Ralph's eye as he led Helena out on the floor, but he paid her no attention. At that moment, at least, the sensible solicitor had eyes only for Lady Helena.

Half a second passed, and then Maud found herself alone, amidst a sea of people, with Lord Tilbury no more than half a pace away. "I shall endeavor not to bore you with my company this time," she said crisply.

A wry smile came over the duke's face, and he shook his head ruefully. "Will you ever forgive me for that, I wonder?"

"Not likely," said Maud, her face breaking into a wary smile. She allowed him to lead her out onto the dance floor where they formed a set with three other couples to dance the quadrille. "And how is your pinerie?"

"Not well, actually," said the duke, as they waited for the musicians to strike up a tune. "The orange trees are sickly—I'm investigating the cause."

"Oh," said Maud, surprised at his response. "Surely, your gardener must have some insight."

"Sadly, no," said the duke. "Max is just as much a novice at tropical fruit as I am. Hedges are his specialty, and roses. We muddle along well enough together though, and I've taken the liberty of applying to Wedgwood at the Horticultural Society for some expert advice." He coughed discreetly. "How was the pineapple?"

"I regret to say that my mother has not yet allowed us to consume it. It must be displayed to advantage for at least a full week before we cut into it."

"That surprises me. Your mother did not strike me as a woman so concerned about appearances."

"Are not we all?" asked Maud. The thought of her incriminating letter dangled before her mind—and the thought of what appearances would be if Victor saw her conversing so comfortably with Lord Tilbury. She glanced around the room hurriedly to ensure that her stepson was not present.

"I find myself less concerned about such the older I become. For instance, I intend to dance with you three or four times tonight—let appearances be what they may."

"How very presumptuous of you," said Maud lightly, her breath catching in her throat. "And who shall keep watch over Helena while you are doing so? Are you not worried about her wandering off into dark corners with my brother?"

"Not with *that* particular brother," said Lord Tilbury, glancing over to the set of couples where Ralph and Helena were standing. He was right—Ralph's birth might be ignoble, but his behavior was impeccable, while with Will, the shoe was almost on the opposite foot.

The violins began to bow their strings. Maud turned easily through the opening steps of the quadrille. In her experience, tall men were often gangly and unconvincing in the art of dance, but Lord Tilbury

turned with her in perfect time.

Maud tilted her chin up to look her partner full in the face. “The wedding is in less than a fortnight—what will you do with yourself with Helena gone and no one to *manage*?”

The duke laughed. “I must turn my attention to affairs of state, I suppose. Parliament convenes soon, and I shall take my seat in the House of Lords.”

“You actually seem enthused by the prospect! I don’t suppose there’s another young buck in London who would look forward to sitting through speeches on taxes and tariffs four evenings a week.”

He caught her hand in his as they passed in a chain to the next figure. His green eyes stared into hers intently. “How shall I ever persuade you, Lady Worlington, that I am not like *most young men*?”

Maud returned the stare. Even the restrained touch of his fingertips was liquefying her resolve. “How? I do not know, but I *am* willing to be persuaded.”

He leaned in as they waited for the lead couple to finish their promenade and whispered close to her ear. “I am glad to hear it. A somewhat different message than your letter this morning.”

Her heart beat a little faster, both from the duke’s nearness and from his reference to the letter. How could she explain her unusual request and the about-face of her current behavior?

She was just deciding what kind of story she must concoct when, suddenly, the true reason for the letter appeared. Sir Victor Worlington was giving his card to the Master of Ceremonies and was about to be announced.

CHAPTER 14

"I beg your pardon, my lord, but I find a headache coming on and must excuse myself."

Before Geoffrey could object, Lady Worlington had relinquished his hand and darted into the crowd of matrons lining the edge of the dance floor. Bewildered, Geoffrey still had enough aplomb to offer a quick apology to the other couples in their set before he set out in pursuit of his fugitive partner. Scanning the ball room, he saw a red dress disappear into the card room next door. He strode past the musicians, ignoring the greetings of half a dozen matriarchs with daughters lately out in society.

Headache? He doubted it. More likely, he had frightened her somehow—just as he had done in the staircase under the mistletoe at midnight. Was it his promise to dance with her three or four times? Was it his mention of the letter she had sent?

Once in the card room, he scanned the tables for signs of Lady Worlington. But once again, she was moving too quickly for him. He saw her red skirt disappearing through the other entrance into the supper room beyond.

"Tilbury, my dear fellow!" said a cheerful voice, halting him in his chase.

Geoffrey felt a hand clap him on the shoulder and turned around to see Stapleton Aldine's heavyset face.

"How can I help you?" he said, some of his usual cordiality absent. The hour he had spent at the King's Theatre watching Stapleton Aldine through Helena's opera glasses had been enough to thoroughly sour his opinion of the man.

"I am looking for my cousin, and I was wondering if you, perhaps __"

Geoffrey flourished his hand in the direction of a nearby card table. "Why, there he is, sir. A-gaming as usual." Will's face was flushed, and he swore loudly as he laid down a dismal hand of cards.

"Aha," said Stapleton. "You mistake me. I am not at all interested in Will. That young scamp has been tormenting Eustace to no end.

Why, what do you think of this? He invited him to his club, and then, after the boy was inside and playing billiards, pretended that he did not know him so that the gatekeepers threw him out. Some officers saw the whole thing and stood him a drink afterward, but he was still quite humiliated. Can you imagine such a thing?"

Geoffrey could very well imagine such a thing from the likes of his future brother-in-law.

"No, no, it is not Will I mean. It is Lady Worlington I am after."

"Indeed?" replied Geoffrey. "Why, in that case, I can provide no help, Mr. Aldine." Other than in warning the lady to stay well away.

"Ah, well, perhaps I shall try the supper room. Young ladies are prodigiously fond of sweetmeats, I find."

"I bow to your superior knowledge of the fair sex," said Geoffrey, raising an eyebrow and cursing inwardly. He could hardly follow on Stapleton Aldine's heels as the man made for the very room where Lady Worlington was. He would bide his time a moment or two before he continued his pursuit. He walked over to the card table behind Will Aldine and feigned interest in the game.

"Spying on me?" demanded Will, taking a drink of his glass of bourbon. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, inebriated just enough to be belligerent.

"Why ever would I do that?" asked Geoffrey smoothly.

"You tell me," said Will, following suit with his next card. "But I've heard you've been asking questions at my club. And I saw your man watching outside my house all day today." He grabbed Geoffrey's arm and pulled him closer so that their faces were almost on a level. "It's not to be borne," he snarled softly. "You have what you want. Now stay out of my affairs."

Geoffrey pulled away. The boy was drunk as a wheelbarrow and imagining things. It was true that Geoffrey had made inquiries about Will's money and morals, but he had never sent someone to watch him.

"Outside your house? I don't know what you mean. And are you referring to your *father's* house? I don't recall you having your own residence in Grosvenor Square."

Will growled and returned to his game, but it was clear that Geoffrey's words had hit home. He had promised Helena he would drop a word in Will's ear about finding a new residence—but since he was clearly in Will's black books, a simple jibe might be more effective than good-natured advice.

Geoffrey looked toward the door of the supper room. Stapleton had passed through and not returned. It had been long enough. He would follow and find Lady Worlington—perhaps he had startled her, but he flattered himself that even so, he was a more desirable conversation partner than her dead bore of a cousin.

O

MAUD SET A course straight for the punch. Having secured a cup, she eyed the room for some safe matrons to hover near. Victor's arrival was no accident. His spies had clearly told him her whereabouts. He would be looking for her, and when he found her, she was determined to be nowhere in the vicinity of Lord Tilbury—or any other gentleman, for that matter.

During the course of her marriage, Sir Humboldt had indulged her, encouraging her to go to every amusement the limited society in Devon had to offer. But everywhere she went had lurked the shadow of Victor Worlington. Every word she spoke to the village doctor, every smile she bestowed on the village apothecary, every dance with the sons of the neighboring gentry was scrutinized to be dissected afterward. And where his father was indulgent, Victor was as jealous as the grave. Many a night, while traveling home from some card party or rout, Maud would watch with dismay to see old Hum nod off to sleep on the carriage cushions knowing that Victor would seize the opportunity to apply his whispered torments. "I'm sure the vicar's wife saw you batting your eyes so brazenly at her husband…. You certainly displayed your charms to full advantage for the squire…. A trollop would have conducted herself better." That voice—that accusing voice—had accosted her so many times that, even when Victor was not present, she found it speaking in her head.

Maud sipped her punch and made up her mind to approach the safe orbit of Lady Cowper. She hoped the woman would remember her after her absence of seven years from society functions.

But before she could insert herself, she was arrested by the silky sound of her cousin's voice. "My dear Maud, I've found you at last."

"Stapleton!" She forced a smile onto her face. "I did not expect to see you here."

"I stopped by your house after dinner, but your father said you had gone out. You are quite the butterfly, now that you're back in London, flitting from flower to flower to drink new nectars of delight.

Fortunately, your mother knew where you had gone."

"Oh, yes?" said Maud, her eyes darting wildly around the room looking for an avenue of escape. "And you…followed me here?"

"Yes, my dear Maud," Stapleton preened. "I did take that liberty. I had a very particular question that I was desirous of putting to you tonight." He took her hand and, before she could protest, led her over to a pair of chairs in the low-lit corner of the supper room. "You can hardly be ignorant of what I wish to say to you." He leaned close to keep his words confidential.

"I am not sure this is an appropriate setting for a private conversation." Maud tried to rise from the chair he had seated her in, but he caught at her arm and begged her to stay. She could hardly refuse without making a scene. Her heart began to race as her anger with Stapleton and her anxiety over Victor crescendoed.

"Perhaps not," said Stapleton, "but I find myself able to wait no longer, and so the present venue must suffice. I have your father's permission to address you, and so I put it to you, Maud, what could be more agreeable than an alliance between the two sides of our family? Our spouses are both gone. What could be more natural than for us to seek solace with each other?"

Maud winced. The thought of an alliance with Stapleton was decidedly *un*natural in her mind. "I thank you for your proposal, but such a notion is wholly surprising to me, and I must decline the honor, I fear."

"I am struck speechless," said Stapleton. "I am dumbfounded. When you received my gift of the emeralds—and wore them to the opera this week—was I not right in thinking that you returned my interest?"

"You were right in thinking that my *father* returned your interest," said Maud. "I, on the other hand, do not. And I must ask you to please refrain from expressing any such interest to me in the future."

"But my dear Maud—"

She began to breathe more quickly. If he would not let her escape, she must be even more blunt about the matter. "Let us speak plainly, Stapleton." She bowed her head closer to his, so that only his ear would catch the words she was about to say. "I have it on good authority that you are flying without a feather. And what you may not know is that my marriage settlement has become…encumbered, and I am short on capital as well."

Stapleton's mouth fell open in shock. "I have no idea who has been

telling you such taradiddles about me, my dear Maud. And what is this you say—encumbered? Surely, you have an annuity from your settlement?"

"That is neither here nor there, nor is it any of your concern."

Stapleton was not ready to let the subject drop. "Is your father apprised of your…lack of funds?"

"No. Nor does he need to be."

"My dear Maud, he most certainly does. Unless he means to settle money on you again, it is most unjust of him to be encouraging suitors as if you are an heiress. You are not in your first youth, and it will not be so easy for you to secure a husband a second time if you are penniless."

Maud's cheeks burned at the insult, but before she could reply, she caught sight of Victor Worlington standing in the corner across from her, arms folded, brows furrowed, taking in from afar the whole of her whispered exchange with Stapleton. And the heat in her face disappeared as soon as it had come while the coldness of dread settled into her breast.

CHAPTER 15

Geoffrey gritted his teeth. Stapleton Aldine was thrusting his presence upon Lady Worlington in a most ungentlemanly manner. He could see her distaste in the rigid lines of her back and the set of her jaw. The quadrille in the ballroom had finished, and Helena had made her way to the supper room to find her brother standing in the doorway.

"Helena," said Geoffrey, leaning in to whisper in his sister's ear, "now is the time for you to ask Lady Worlington to take a turn about the room with you."

"What, now?" asked his sister, perplexed. "She seems otherwise engaged at present. Surely—"

"Now." Geoffrey's voice was as taut as a bowstring.

Obediently, Helena approached Lady Worlington, and Geoffrey watched the pleasure in her eyes as she rose from her seat and took his sister's arm. Mr. Aldine was not so delighted—Geoffrey could make out the lines of annoyance on his fat face as his bejeweled fingers gripped the arms of his chair. Geoffrey's eyes followed the two women—he would let Helena plead his case for him and then rejoin them in a short while.

In the corner of the room he saw Sir Victor Worlington standing stiffly. Egad! Yet another reason for Lady Worlington to be out of sorts. Sir Victor seemed to have the same interest as Geoffrey—his gaze did not leave Lady Worlington's figure as she stopped and conversed with Helena by the punch table. Geoffrey's eyes narrowed. He was still convinced, from his afternoon call yesterday, that there was some havey-cavey business with that gentleman and Lady Worlington.

"Lord Tilbury!" said a bright voice. He found himself face to face with the indomitable Miss Anthea Wedgwood. "I declare, you have been avoiding me lately! Do you deny it?"

Geoffrey made a mock bow. "Why, Miss Wedgwood, how can you accuse me of such a crime?" He took her hand in courtly fashion.

“How can I *not* accuse you? The evidence is as plain as day. I saw you at the opera two nights ago, but you did not visit me at my box—no, nor even exchange a wave of the hand across the theater.”

Geoffrey lifted an eyebrow. Even before meeting Lady Worlington, Miss Wedgwood’s shocking directness had started to wear on him.

“Who is that with Lady Helena?”

Geoffrey squinted, as if he was trying to make out Helena’s companion. He had no desire to expose his interest in that area to Miss Wedgwood’s rapier-like tongue. “Lady Worlington, I believe.”

“Ah, yes! She came out the same year as my sister Emma.” Miss Wedgwood pursed her lips. “But she, at least, seems to have kept her figure. Emma has grown most uncommonly fat after two babies, and my mother tells me she is *enceinte* again!”

“Congratulations to Lord Fremont,” said Geoffrey, naming Emma’s husband.

“Hmm, well, I suppose *he* is well-pleased with the number of children she’s given him. *He* does not have to go to the trouble of birthing them.”

“Indeed,” he said dryly, “the responsibility of the male sex is far less arduous.” He had no intention of discussing procreation any further with a young lady at an assembly. But that was the way with Miss Wedgwood—she could, without fail, entrap a man into inappropriate conversation.

She looked him up and down. “Do you mean to ask me to dance?”

Geoffrey stared. Now that he had found a woman he truly desired to dance with, he had no interest in dallying with the likes of Anthea Wedgwood. “No, Miss Wedgwood, I do not mean to do so.”

Her mouth fell open. She was so used to trampling over gentlemen like one of Hannibal’s war elephants that she did not expect a rebuff.

“Well then,” she huffed, “I shall bid you good night, Lord Tilbury.” She turned and made her way through the door to the card room in search of easier quarry.

Having disentangled himself from Miss Wedgwood, Geoffrey looked back to the punch table, only to find that Helena and Lady Worlington had disappeared. He had been standing by the French doors that opened to the card room, and they had not passed by him. But he soon saw that there was another exit from the supper room leading out into a corridor. He would search in that direction.

He followed the corridor parallel to the card room and the ballroom until he came out at last into the entrance to the assembly

rooms. There was Helena, alone, staring at the backs of two retreating figures. Geoffrey recognized Lady Worlington's dark hair, her red dress covered by a navy-blue cloak and her hand resting in the arm of a dark-haired gentleman. A servant closed the door behind them, and she was gone into the night, her appearance snuffed out like a candle.

"What happened?" Geoffrey demanded, advancing to his sister's elbow.

"Oh, it was all so peculiar!" said Helena. "I was thanking Maud for her kindness to me at the engagement ball—I had never expressed how grateful I was for her to rescue me when I became ill—and I was planning to mention you next when a strange fellow appeared at her side. He looked German, or a military man."

"Victor Worlington?" asked Geoffrey. He felt his knuckles tighten involuntarily.

"I don't know," replied Helena. "He did not take the trouble to be introduced to me. He simply mentioned something to Maud about the date of a house party being moved, and how it was to be directly following the twelve days of Christmas and he hoped she would attend. She told him she would give him her answer later. He told her not to wait too long. And then he disappeared."

"And then what?" Geoffrey realized that he was gripping his sister's arm much too tightly and relaxed his hold. He swallowed. "I beg your pardon. What did she do then?"

Helena shrugged. "She grew very quiet, and then burst out saying, 'I'm afraid you're not the only one to drink too much punch at parties.' At which point she asked me to find her brother to take her home. So, I went to ask Will, but he did not see the urgency and was quite engaged with his game of whist—"

"Selfish lout," growled Geoffrey, and to his surprise, Helena did not immediately jump to her fiancé's defense.

"—so I found Ralph Aldine, and he was far more obliging. He has just left with Maud to escort her home." Helena gave her brother a wan smile. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to put in a word for you, Geoffrey. Perhaps when she is feeling more herself…."

"Yes, yes, of course," replied the duke. The wheels of his mind began to turn, trying to decipher what factors had provoked Lady Worlington into such strange behavior tonight. Had he pursued her too boldly? Had Stapleton Aldine distressed her? Or Sir Victor? "If you don't mind, could we leave early as well?"

"If you wish." Helena smoothed out the skirt of her gauzy blue

dress. “I must confess, I feel a little out of sorts. I will find the Cecils and let them know that we’ll send the carriage back for them. And I ought to take my leave of Will.”

Geoffrey exchanged a few pleasantries with Lady Cowper while Helena found her friends in the ballroom. He saw Anthea Wedgwood bearing down on him again like a barque in full sail. He did not know whether to cringe or be impressed—the woman was as indefatigable in her matrimonial pursuits as her father was in his horticultural experimentation.

He dodged into the card room. There, Stapleton Aldine had joined his cousin Will at the whist table and was roaring convivially at some sort of quip. Apparently, his annoyance at his cousin’s treatment of Eustace had abated enough that he could enjoy his company. Will looked in much better spirits than he had been earlier—his luck must have turned.

Seeing Miss Wedgwood hovering at the door of the card room, Geoffrey pulled out a chair and sat down near the table. He would observe matters here while he waited for Helena.

“Do you have plans tomorrow night, Tilbury?” asked Will, leaning back in his chair and downing the rest of his glass of spirits.

“Nothing definite. Why?”

“I hear there’s a little hell near Vauxhall that bears investigating.”

Geoffrey’s eyes narrowed. He hardly wanted to encourage Will’s gambling.

“But then, high stakes—risk—was never your favorite, was it?” Will leaned in boorishly and leered at Geoffrey, having had enough alcohol to be properly shot in the neck by now.

“You know me so well, Aldine,” said Geoffrey, refusing to pull away. “Perhaps I will come though—to observe.”

“*To observe*,” mimicked Will. “Always observing. And am I to expect this same sneaking around and spying after I’m leg-shackled to your dear sister? By then it will be too late, won’t it?”

Geoffrey did not answer. Once again, he was assailed with the powerful doubt that whatever happened here, Helena would be the loser. But then, she had made her choice. There was little he could do about it now.

“We meet at Stapleton’s after supper tomorrow,” said Will. “Come along if you like—it would do you good to get out of your account books, and your fruit house, and your club of odd fish, and live like a common man for once.”

Geoffrey gave a noncommittal grunt. From the corner of his eye, he could see that he was not the only person making observations. Sir Victor Worlington had entered the card room and was watching their whole table—Stapleton Aldine, Will, Will's card-playing opponents—with interest. Geoffrey twisted in the chair to show the man his back. Who was this fellow, and what the deuce did he want with Maud Worlington?

"Oh, here you are," said Helena, coming into the room and resting her hands on the back of Geoffrey's seat.

"Helena!" said Will, looking up and giving her a beaming smile that Geoffrey deemed insincere. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, quite," said Helena. By which, Geoffrey could see she meant the opposite. He could not help thinking that Lady Worlington would have been more direct—though perhaps not as direct as Miss Wedgwood.

Will, however, seemed to have no inkling that his fiancée's words were a sham. "Come to watch me play?"

"Geoffrey and I were just leaving. I will see you tomorrow, though? Will you dine with us?"

"Tomorrow…." Will struck a pose as if he were thinking deeply. "Alas, I'm afraid I have a prior engagement in the evening. But never fear, sweetheart,"—he reached up and pinched her chin—"there'll be time enough in the world for us to see each other soon. Good night!"

Geoffrey offered his sister his arm and escorted her through the adjacent corridor and out of the assembly building. "Not exactly the evening you hoped for?" he asked kindly as he handed her into the carriage.

"Not exactly," replied Helena, "but at least the Cecils are amused. Edwina was quite the belle of the ball."

"And so would you have been," said Geoffrey, sitting close beside her on the bench and throwing a lap rug over the two of them, "if you were not already tied up with Will."

She grew very quiet, the air in the carriage as still as the night.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Geoffrey asked. "It's not too late to break it off. We can find another way—"

"Yes," said Helena, her voice as sharp as falling ice. "I love him, Geoffrey. Why do you refuse to understand as much? I love him, and he loves me."

"Very well then," said her brother, trying to hide the doubt in his own voice. For Will did not love her—that, he knew—and he was

afraid that a world of sorrow awaited her when she recognized the truth for herself.

As they arrived at the house, Helena said a quick goodnight and flitted up the stairs to her room, no doubt glad to be shed of her older brother's odious advice.

Geoffrey paced the floor for a moment and then bid his butler send a glass of claret to his study. His mind was racing with thoughts of his sister's future and the mysteries surrounding Lady Worlington. It would be impossible to go to sleep now. He would read a while before bed.

As he turned to leave the entrance hall, a sharp rap sounded on the door. A yawning footman jumped to attention, but Geoffrey waved him away. He would answer the door himself. He opened it and saw the serious visage of Ralph Aldine, the lower portion wrapped up in a muffler and the top portion surmounted by a beaver.

"I apologize for the lateness," said Ralph, "but might I have a word, your grace?"

"Of course," said Geoffrey, his curiosity piqued. He was certain that whatever Ralph had to communicate involved either Will or Lady Worlington—but which?

He admitted Ralph and turned to the butler who had reappeared with a decanter on a tray. "Better make it two glasses of claret, and light a good fire in the study—we may sit up a while."

The Sixth Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 16

"Stop me, Perkins, or I shall go mad!" Maud was still in her dressing gown, hair disheveled after a fitful night, pacing the room like a caged animal.

"We must think of a plan, my lady," said her lady's maid. She seized Maud by the shoulders and led her over to a chair and made her sit.

"I've been cudgeling my brains all night," said Maud. "What can I possibly say to dissuade him? If I agree to go back to Devon, I protect my reputation but doom my future. If I refuse his summons, he will publish that letter, and I shall be the laughingstock of London. What will my father say when he hears the story? It would kill him!"

"You said you told your brother, my lady—perhaps he can do something."

Maud groaned. "Oh, Ralph will do all he can, but he has no money and no standing that carries any weight. He cannot bring any influence to bear on Victor, and if Ralph—or Will—were to call him out, Victor would murder the pair of them without mercy. Dear God, I am ruined!" Maud turned her face toward the chair in despair and buried her forehead in the upholstery.

"How many days?"

"Six or seven."

"Perhaps you can delay him a little."

Maud turned her face toward the window and began to drum her fingers on the arm of the chair. "Will's wedding is in a fortnight. I can beg him to allow me another week so I may attend it. There will be all sorts of questions raised if I leave London before it—although I doubt he's concerned about creating a scandal."

Lucy Perkins pursed her lips. "Lawks, I think he's more concerned about appearances than you give him credit for, my lady. He never did show the letter to his father, did he?"

"No, I don't think he did."

"Well?" Perkins shrugged.

“You mean it’s an empty threat? If I defy him, he wouldn’t actually publish the letter?”

“I don’t know as I would go that far, but I think it wouldn’t be his first choice—for then how could he torment you any further? And believe you me, my lady, that’s where he derives his pleasure—he likes to see you shaking in your stays at the uncertainty of what *might* happen.”

“A very ill choice of words,” said Maud with a shudder, for the thought of Victor seeing her in her stays was as vile as it was repugnant, “but you are right. Bring me my writing tray, and I shall write a note begging a reprieve till after Will’s wedding.” She breathed deeply to compose herself. “And in the meantime, I shall see what other options I have open to me. I will *not* be intimidated by him, for if I let fear control my actions, he has already won.”

O

GEOFFREY’S SHOULDERS FLEXED as his valet helped him into a tight-fitting green jacket. He had chosen the Society of Eccentrics instead of Angelo’s this morning, although after last night, he was feeling more in the mood to lunge, parry, riposte, and bloody an opponent. He had received a note, however, from the Marquis Montesquerrat asking him to breakfast at the club, and what he needed now was information—sating his own bloodlust would come later.

Following Queen Esther’s example, he waited for the sausages to have been consumed before he broached his questions to his friend. “Do you know a man named Worlington?”

The marquis pursed his lips. “*Non*. But I know *of* him. Sir Victor, *eh bien*?”

“That’s it,” said Geoffrey. “What do you know about him?”

“You would not care for him, *mon ami*. He is a philistine, through and through.”

Geoffrey grinned, although his joviality was forced. “I met him briefly, and I would expect nothing less.”

“He used to wear a red coat, but he bought himself out of the cavalry when his father died. One hears that he is a ‘crack shot,’ but then again, rumor can overpraise such men.”

“Is he married?”

“*Non*, but I hear he has come lately to town. Perhaps he is here to find a bride?” The marquis’ eyes glinted with interest. Geoffrey had a

feeling that his friend was learning just as much information as he was divulging.

The duke grunted, unwilling to give too much away. “Or looking for something else entirely. Do you know where he’s lodging?”

“His father owned a townhouse, but it’s been closed and shuttered for some time. I would try Maurice’s or one of the other hotels.”

“Thank you,” said Geoffrey, rising to his feet. “Your omniscience never fails me.”

The marquis nearly blushed at the compliment. “*Eh bien*,” he murmured, “I merely try to stay informed.” He rose to his feet as well to shake Geoffrey’s hand. “Tonight, I am hosting a small *soirée*. Will you come, and your beautiful sister, of course?”

Geoffrey grimaced. “It would be my pleasure, but unfortunately, I am promised to Will Aldine to visit some squalid hell near Vauxhall. If I am going to lose money, I would at least like to do it in a place that does not reek of gin and cheap perfume.”

The marquis shrugged. “Ah, well, perhaps Lady Helena then?”

“Unchaperoned?” Geoffrey raised an eyebrow. “I think not.”

“Perhaps the widow Worlington could accompany her?” There was a sly smile lurking around Montesquerrat’s mouth. “A widow is a very respectable duenna, *n’est-ce pas*?”

Geoffrey cursed inwardly. Apparently, his friend *was* omniscient. But to refer to Lady Worlington as a duenna? The marquis was just goading him now…he would not take the bait. “Send around a card,” he said coolly, “and I shall see if Helena wishes to attend.”

“*Mais certainement*, I will! And perhaps if you slip away from your hell a little early, you will join us before the ladies go home?”

The offer was tempting, although it hardly sorted well with the plan he and Ralph had concocted the night before. “Perhaps,” said Geoffrey, allowing his mind to dally with the idea of seeing Lady Worlington again. But memories of her distress at the assembly last night soon cut that dalliance short. There were other matters to settle before she would settle comfortably into his company—or into his arms.

O

“WELL, MY DEAR?” asked Lady Aldine, giving Maud a meaningful look. No doubt she wanted a full description of everything that had transpired at the assembly last night—who was in attendance, who

had danced with whom, what sort of refreshments had been served. Besides her tambour work, the gaiety of town life was one of Lady Aldine's favorite hobbies. If she could not attend a social gathering, the next best thing was an account of it.

Maud's heart began to palpitate wildly. The clearest memory in her mind from yesterday evening was Victor's cold voice and insinuating comments. Ever since that foolish letter, he had held her in his grip, and now he was constricting her tighter and tighter until it was almost impossible to breathe. Soon he would swallow her whole if she could not find a way to escape his coils.

"The assembly was delightful, Mama, but I came home early with a headache."

"Oh," said Lady Aldine, "then you did not run across St—"

She paused as Lord Aldine walked slowly into the room. "What was that?" he said, walking toward the ladies and sinking deeply into his favorite armchair. "Did Stapleton find you last night, Maud?"

Lady Aldine shifted her tambour frame to see her husband more clearly. "Maud was just telling me that she came home early with a headache."

"Ah," said the old viscount. "More's the pity. Still, I suspect Stapleton will be back tonight then. He has a very particular question to put to you, my girl."

Maud clasped her hands in her lap. Now would be the ideal time to mention that he already *had* put that question to her and she had declined.

Lord Aldine began to cough violently and clutched at his chest. Lady Aldine laid down her tambour hook and rose in concern. "It's nothing," said Lord Aldine hoarsely, gasping for air like a fish out of water.

Soon the spell passed, but not so Maud's anxiety. How would her father respond when he eventually learned that she had refused Stapleton? She was almost certain that Stapleton would not tell him *why* she had declined—he could hardly disclose his own lack of funds without embarrassment or her own lack of funds without appearing mercenary. No, the fault would fall on her own feminine caprice, and her father would not receive it well.

She took a deep breath to quell the rising panic in her breast. She had enough to worry about from Victor's veiled threats without suffering from Stapleton's spleen.

Fullerton entered bearing a silver tray and moved in her direction.

“A letter arrived for you, my lady.”

Maud’s fingers seized it and opened it automatically. Her mother settled back into her seat on the sofa and directed a questioning eyebrow at her.

“It is from Lady Helena,” said Maud, summarizing in brief. “She wishes me to escort her to a card party tonight since her brother is otherwise engaged.”

“Oh, how delightful that she has taken to you so quickly,” said Lady Aldine. “I have always been a little sad for you that you have no sister, but now you shall!”

“I imagine Stapleton will be calling again,” wheezed Lord Aldine. His wrinkled face would have looked fierce had it not been so weak.

“Yes, but I’m sure Maud can still make plans for her evening without inconveniencing her cousin,” said Lady Aldine, soothingly. “You will say yes to Helena, won’t you, Maud?”

“Of course, Mama,” said Maud, rising to go to her room and find her writing materials. She could not please both parents, but it was easy enough to please one. And besides, the letter clearly stated that Lord Tilbury would not be in attendance. Until she could figure out how to foil Victor’s demands, she needed to stay as far from Geoffrey Angiers as possible.

CHAPTER 17

Geoffrey looked at his new hand of cards. He had a decent assortment in the trump suit, but being partnered with Will, he was still likely to lose this round. It was not that Will was a wretched player in his normal capacity. But as he was now—ape-drunk and verging on belligerence—there was no knowing what he would do. Geoffrey sighed inwardly. Ever since last night, he had been champing at the bit to follow Ralph's plan and find a way to enter Lady Worlington's good graces. But now here he was, forced to waste his evening with her younger brother, a man he found as offensive as bilge water.

The party had started early—Geoffrey had arrived at Stapleton's home near the Thames only to discover that libations had already been served. Instead of taking a hackney towards Vauxhall, they had gone by boat, a beetle-browed waterman rowing them over the Thames in a newly painted white wherry. The lantern in the front cast rays over the dark water, and they were soon across the river, having drifted a score of feet downriver on the current.

The hell was only a short walk from the dilapidated dock where the boat tied up. Geoffrey threw the waterman a shilling and told him there was more for him if he waited till the return voyage, and then they walked down the street and ducked into the hell.

"Ho there, Aldine!" said half a dozen of the gamers surrounding them, but Geoffrey sensed that the greetings were all directed at Will, not Stapleton. Stapleton was clearly not a frequenter of haunts such as this and preferred to watch rather than play a hand himself. Will, on the other hand, was known and known well.

Geoffrey watched him shout with laughter at the ribald banter of seasoned gamers and dissolute wastrels. He watched him bully his way through four rounds of piquet and five glasses of spirits. And now here they were, partnered in a high-stakes game of whist. And while Geoffrey had been musing, the stakes had just become higher, for Will had increased his bet.

“How’s that ladybird from the King’s Theatre?” demanded one of their opponents, a heavyset fellow with a bulbous nose. It was Lord Fremont, husband of the eldest Wedgwood heiress. “You wouldn’t care to stake her on this round, would you?”

Geoffrey stiffened imperceptibly, his face frozen into a mask.

“No, indeed!” said Will without a care for who was listening. “The amount I’ve already spent on her is five times the pot, and I don’t mean to relinquish an investment like that until I’m fully satisfied with the return.”

At this, there were winks and hooting catcalls exchanged all around. Geoffrey downed his glass of bourbon, trying to swallow down the bile rising in his throat. He thought he had been clever with his inquiries about Will Aldine, but he could see now that they had only given him a false sense of confidence. Instead of making inquiries, he should have been courting Will Aldine’s company himself. He would have known then just how deeply dipped his pockets were when it came to cards. He would have known then just how dissolute his morals were when it came to Cyprians and Drury Lane doxies.

An actress, was it? The blond-wigged one from the King’s Theatre?

“Well then,” said Lord Fremont, revealing the winning hand. “Let me know if you’re cutting her adrift anytime soon. I’d be happy to bring her aboard my lifeboat, eh?” The heavy peer giggled at both his wit and his victory, as Will, with a scowl, ordered the scribe to take down his vowels in the betting book.

“Have you had enough of this?” demanded Geoffrey, gripping Will by the shoulder. His own pocketbook had been depleted by the loss, but not as sorely as his patience. God’s blood! He wanted nothing more than to take his future brother-in-law out into the filthy alleyway and bludgeon some sense into his bacon-brained head.

And even greater than the anger that he felt toward Will Aldine was the anger that he felt toward himself. How confident he had been six months ago that he would be able to guide his sister through the perils of the ton—a green boy trying to play both father and mother to an even greener girl! And now? Was her fate in life to be shackled to a libertine who held her worth as cheap as any actress?

“No, devil take it! I have *not* had enough!” said Will, glowering. He leaned in to whisper loudly, his breath reeking with spirits. “Don’t bother playing the Puritan, Tilbury, when I know what you are. You would have debauched my sister without a second thought if

circumstances had allowed it, and I can't prove it yet, but I'd stake my eyes you have some high-flyer of your own up in a little bungalow in Kent."

Geoffrey gritted his teeth, refusing to dignify that accusation with a response. There was still time to call things off—he would find a way to salvage Helena's reputation if the banns were canceled. He looked around for his beaver and placed it on his head. "Don't stop losing money on account of me, Aldine. I wish you better sense and good night."

Stapleton materialized just as Geoffrey was heading for the door. "Come now," the middle-aged man said smoothly, as if the departure was his own idea. "We've all drunk more than our fair share—Bacchus can bring a brawl between the best of companions. Let's not say things we might regret, Lord Tilbury. And if we cannot part as friends, no need to part at all yet." He handed Will his beaver and extended a pudgy hand to help him rise from the table. Geoffrey noted that Stapleton's usual gewgaws were missing from his fingers.

"We've heard the chimes at midnight," said Stapleton, "and now onward to home and hearth."

"It's barely midnight," said Will, his speech slurred. "Tilbury's bedtime, to be sure, but hours still till mine." Stapleton took Will's arm, and the potted Aldine made only a show of resistance, letting himself be led away out of the hell.

"I'll take a hackney home," said Geoffrey sharply as the dock came in sight.

"Nonsense, my good fellow," said Stapleton. "The air on the Thames will cool your blood."

Geoffrey hesitated. He was still seething at Will's perfidy, but at the same time, it was clear that Stapleton was struggling to support Will's weight as they reeled toward the boat. And however much he might detest Will's character, he was still Lady Worlington's brother. Breathing deeply, he grabbed Will's other arm, more roughly than was necessary, and together the two men dragged their inebriated companion to the boat.

By the light of the white wherry's lantern, Geoffrey could make out the same young, bushy-browed waterman who had carried them to the southern side of the river. He grunted as they came aboard, shouting a caution as Will unbalanced the boat and nearly sloshed water over the side. "Sit down!" He shoved off from the dock with a pole.

Geoffrey's jaw set like concrete as his taut body resisted the gentle rocking of the boat. The cold wind whipped at his cheeks, threatening to overset his beaver. He had no intention of helping the Aldine cousins any further after they landed. Let Stapleton assist the foxed reprobate home. Geoffrey intended to walk off his own devils until he reached his town house.

The cold grew closer and closer, and Geoffrey began to feel his legs grow numb. He reached down into the hull of the boat and found water, ankle deep, starting to seep through his Hessians. "Ho there!" he called to the pilot. "You're shipping water, man!" But the fellow kept staring straight ahead as though he did not hear.

They were in the center of the channel now. A great gurgle filled the quiet night air, and the water began to rise with a swiftness that Geoffrey did not expect. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded, looking from Stapleton to Will, but when he looked back to the front of the sinking wherry, the pilot was nowhere to be seen.

"Help, help!" called Stapleton, as the boat disappeared beneath them, the lantern, their sole source of light, finding a watery grave. Will, the last to realize what was happening, gave a gurgling cry. Geoffrey tried to kick off his boots to give himself a better chance at staying afloat, but the Hessians were so snug that he could barely get them off in normal circumstances without his valet's help. He kicked strenuously, reaching out for the boat, an oar, anything to keep himself afloat.

After the first panic had subsided, he relaxed enough to see the buildings on the far side, their lamps shining like a lodestar. His long arms struck out like blades, cutting through the frigid water with desperation. Every stroke or two his sodden clothing would drag his head beneath the water, and he would struggle mightily to gain the air again. Two minutes passed, then three, each moment the length of an hour. And just when he thought his lungs would burst, he felt the sole of his boot touch down on the rising riverbed.

He crawled up onto the bank on his hands and knees, hearing shouts and running footsteps from other wherrymen who had seen the disaster. Nearby him, he heard another survivor spluttering and coughing. "Will?" he called out hoarsely, spitting out his own mouthful of river water.

"Stapleton," groaned the other, rolling over on the shore like a beached sea lion. And then men with lanterns were there, lifting them to their feet, wrapping blankets around them, and bringing them up

the bank to the path above.

"Where is the third gentleman?" demanded Geoffrey. "And our pilot?" The wherrymen grunted and shook their heads, pointing to others of their company who were still running up and down the bank with lights.

"Mayhap he washed up further downriver," said a black bearded fellow who seemed to have some clout with the rivermen.

"Pray to God he did!" said Geoffrey, a vague sense of fear overtaking him. He beckoned for a lantern, barely able to hold the handle with his frigid fingers. Teeth chattering uncontrollably, he ran back to the bank and began to search along it. Meanwhile, the black bearded riverman took his own wherry over to the other side, and soon lights were traveling up and down the far bank as well. A quarter hour passed, and then another.

A shout went up from the far bank, splitting the night like a cleaver.

"My God! They've found him!" said Stapleton. He headed farther downstream with Geoffrey, and soon they heard the grinding sound of a wherry returning from the other side, beaching, and being pulled ashore. "Where is he?" demanded Stapleton.

Two rough fellows, younger even than Will pulled a heavy shape out of the wherry. Geoffrey lifted the lantern and peered at their cargo. It was Will all right, but his face was white and swollen, and there was no sign of movement from his limbs. "Drowned?" he asked the black bearded riverman who was disembarking with a splash.

"Aye," said the man laconically. He threaded his tow rope through a nearby iron ring and tied it off. "More's the pity."

O

MAUD REMEMBERED VERY little of the card party hosted by the Marquis Montesquerrat. The events that came afterward obscured it. She remembered the Frenchman was assiduous and charming, with a gleam of humor in his eyes that made up for his unfortunate countenance. She remembered compliments on her green crepe dress, another creation of Madame DeLaittre's that still went unpaid for. She remembered that Helena had insisted on being partnered with her—she was too shy, it seemed, to be partnered with a stranger—and the two women together had played most dismally. And she remembered Montesquerrat's butler interrupting the play to whisper in his master's

ear. The Frenchman had departed momentarily and then returned with a look of constraint and gravity on his face.

"Lady Worlington," their host had said, placing a hand on her shoulder. In other circumstances this motion might be viewed as a liberty, and an unwelcome one, but Maud sensed a tone of veiled concern in the Marquis' voice. "It is growing late, and I think you and your whist partner must excuse yourselves. Come, there is someone waiting to take you home."

In the entrance hall, a tall man in a ragged greatcoat was pacing rapidly, the hair on his uncovered head curling from the moisture of the elements. When he turned around, both women gasped.

"Mercy! Whatever is the matter, Geoffrey?" demanded Helena. Maud was just as impatient as Helena to know the answer, but she resisted adding her voice to the scene.

The duke and his friend exchanged a pain-filled glance. "I've come to fetch you home," said Geoffrey hoarsely. "And you too, Lady Worlington."

Montesquerrat began to help Helena with her furs which left Lord Tilbury to do the same for Maud. His hand brushed hers as he handed her the muff. Maud flinched. His skin was as cold as ice. Impulsively, she seized his hand and held it clasped for a brief second between hers like the pearl in two halves of a shell. "What is wrong?" she breathed.

He looked over her head instead of meeting her eyes. "I'll tell you in the carriage," he whispered back, and he slipped his frigid hand away from her warm ones.

And so he *had* told them in the carriage, the steadiness in his voice belied by the motion of the carriage lantern he held within his grip. Helena began keening like an orphaned street waif, while Maud, perhaps to compensate, took in the news with stoic silence. So, Will was no more—cut off at the beginning of his independent life, before he had a chance to redeem the time that his foolish youth had squandered. Gone before he had the chance to wed, to get sons.

The carriage pulled up to the door of the Aldine townhouse. "Should I walk inside with you?" asked Lord Tilbury, glancing from Maud's quiet face to Helena's more visible distress.

"No, I can manage," said Maud. And she knew that she could. She had managed her husband's death with no one but odious Victor at her side.

Lord Tilbury nodded. He opened the door and stepped out of the carriage to hand her down. "I will call tomorrow," he said, his voice

muted by the darkness and the winter wind.

Maud nodded. She could already feel him drifting farther away from her, like a barque pulled out by the tide. For what had thrown them together these last seven days other than the impending relationship between their families? And now that Will was gone, there was no longer a tie that bound. She walked up the steps of the townhouse that loomed above her like a hollow tomb.

The Seventh Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 18

At the sound of footsteps outside the room, Jacob Pevensey looked up from his newspaper and coffee. The quick, easy stride was far more carefree than a servant's, but it was also lacking the military precision characteristic of most of his fellow Bow Street Runners. The only plausible conclusion was that Sir Richard had arrived at the office, and one did like to look attentive when the Chief Magistrate entered the room.

"Ah, Pevensey," said Sir Richard, for it was indeed he. He removed his beaver, revealing his dark hair that was just beginning to gray, and set it down on the table where Pevensey had deposited the newspaper. "Just the man I wanted to see." He took the seat opposite and crossed one trim leg over the other.

"I can only presume you have a case for me?" asked Pevensey, his freckled face lighting up with interest. The winter, and particularly the Christmas season, was always a dull patch in detective duties. Burglars seemed much less inclined to burgle when it was cold enough outside to freeze their eyebrows. In the absence of real work, Sir Richard had him trotting all over town trying to stop illicit dueling among the young blades of the upper class—a fool's errand, in Pevensey's opinion.

"I'm not certain, but there's something that bears looking into. A drowning last night in the Thames."

"Someone important?" Pevensey lifted a thin red eyebrow. Of course it was—why else would Sir Richard be looking into it?

"The son of a viscount," replied Sir Richard, "and his only heir to boot."

Pevensey's interest began to be piqued. A crime was a crime whether it was done to a duke or a dockhand, but not even a Bow Street Runner was immune from the lower classes' fascination with the lives of those living in the ton.

"Suspicious?"

"Too soon to say. I haven't had any details yet…I suspect the

family will report the incident this morning."

Pevensey whistled. "And how did you come by the story then, sir, if it hasn't yet been reported via official channels?"

"Seems the fellow was keeping a prime article in fine style over at the King's Theatre, and his valet sent word of the matter last night so she'd not be expecting him."

Pevensey looked at Sir Richard with amusement. "So, the ladies at the King's Theatre and the ladies at Drury Lane, they talk, I take it?"

"Apparently so," said Sir Richard, his lined face falling into a self-satisfied grin. The magistrate made no effort to hide his own prime article at the theater on Drury Lane from his subordinates—a fruitless task among fellows skilled in ferreting out artifice.

Pevensey watched as Sir Richard yawned—apparently, he had slept little last night, something that Pevensey refrained from mentioning. No, better to focus on the subject at hand than on Sir Richard's private life—although heaven knows, when crime was afoot, the lives of no one involved was private anymore. "And when should we be expecting this report from the viscount?"

A servant standing in the open doorway of the room cleared his throat. "If you please, sir," said the spindly fellow. "There's a messenger from Lady Aldine asking you to call upon her at your earliest convenience."

"And there we have it," said Sir Richard, collecting his beaver from atop the newspaper and rising to his feet.

Pevensey stood as well. "I presume you mean for me to accompany you?"

"Yes, of course." Richard Ford might be as well connected as a spider at the center of a web, but he was not going to move out to the edges to solve a case himself. "And while we're on our way over, you can mull over this mystery—why did Lady Aldine send the message when it would surely be more expected to come from her husband?"

O

MAUD PATTED A handkerchief to her tired, dry eyes. She had been awake far too many hours, and her head was pounding with the strain. When she had entered the townhouse at half past one in the morning, she discovered that Will—or rather, Will's body—had been carried in just prior to her arrival. A sopping wet Stapleton was standing by the fire, and her parents were nowhere to be seen.

“My dear Maud,” said Stapleton, moving towards her, his boots squelching as he covered the space between them.

Maud held up a hand to arrest his overtures. “I’ve heard the news. Where are my parents?”

She heard a crashing of the front door as it opened and shut in haste. “Where is he?” demanded a voice. Maud slipped away from Stapleton’s unwanted closeness and out into the hallway where she recognized one of the doctors her family had long frequented handing his hat to the butler.

“Dr. Bowles!” A spark of hope flared up in her breast. “Can he be revived?”

“I certainly hope so,” said the doctor, heading for the stairs without so much as waiting for the butler’s instruction. He gripped his black carrying case of instruments with care as he took the steps two at a time. “But I did warn him that a shock like this might be irreversible.”

“A shock?” Maud mouthed the words in confusion, but the doctor had already disappeared down the upstairs corridor toward her father’s room. The butler stared at Maud apologetically, as if unsure whether he ought to be the one to deliver the news when her cousin was standing by like the town gossip with a tasty morsel to be delivered.

“Please, someone tell me what has happened,” Maud demanded.

“There was an accident, my lady,” said the butler. “The young master—”

“—is dead,” said Maud. It was a callous phrasing, but a necessary one. And besides, from what she had just witnessed, there might be worse news in store. “I’ve heard that already. And what else?”

Stapleton took this moment to intervene, his voice as unctuous as possible to lay oil on troubled waters. “The tragedy was too much for your father. The sight of the body overset him, and he had a fit. He has not moved since, and they’ve carried him to his room.”

Maud swallowed. “And my mother?”

“She is with Lord Aldine,” replied the butler. He hesitated. “I’ve had Master Aldine carried into the parlor since I hardly knew what else to do. If your ladyship might provide some guidance?”

Maud took a deep breath. It was up to her then to stand strong during this crisis as the whole of the Aldine line came crashing down about her. “Yes, of course. Please summon two of the footmen and have them carry him upstairs to his chamber.”

The sight of Will's white face nearly overset Maud as well. The footmen's unease at carrying the inert body was palpable. They almost dropped him twice as they navigated the sharp ascent of the steps. Maud went ahead of them and opened the door to Will's chamber. They deposited him as swiftly as was seemly and disappeared to the kitchen where, no doubt, the whole of the staff was gathered, discussing the events of this night with shocked whispers.

Maud stared down at the lifeless body that was once her brother. The corpse's clothes were wet and slimy and stunk like the river that carried all of London's refuse to the sea. Maud rang for Will's valet, but the gentleman's gentleman was so horrified that he refused to do a mother's office and undress the dead man from his sodden clothing. And so Maud left her brother to lie there while she followed the corridor down to her father's room.

The small figure under the bedclothes looked shriveled, frail, and motionless. The doctor was just packing his instruments away. Maud glanced at Lady Aldine, clad in a blue dressing gown and a mobcap. Her mother's face was nearly as white as her wretched brother's. "How is he?" Maud asked.

"He responds to nothing," said Lady Aldine dully.

"He is in a coma," said Dr. Bowles briskly. "It is possible that he will recover, but I do not wish to give you false hope. Some men in this state never awaken. I think it were prudent, Lady Aldine, to prepare for the worst."

At this, the viscountess burst into tears, and Maud wrapped her mother in her arms soothingly while the doctor bowed his head and made his escape. "I'll send a nurse around," he muttered, and Maud nodded at him over her mother's shoulder to acknowledge the offer.

She led her mother over to the sofa positioned opposite the bed and sat her down. "Oh, my dear child," said Lady Aldine, rubbing her palms against her eyes. "What hell has overtaken us tonight?"

Maud pulled her mother close.

Lady Aldine shifted away, refusing to be comforted. "I always knew that I would be widowed young. But to lose my youngest child in the same night?" A convulsive sob shook her frame. "What are we to *do*?"

"Why, I imagine we shall cry our way through the darkness," said Maud, "and then at morning's light, we shall get up, wash our faces, and carry on as our people always do."

"Ralph!" said Lady Aldine, the thought just coming into her head.

“We must tell him!”

“Let him sleep a few more hours,” said Maud. “We two are enough to keep vigil tonight.”

“And Stapleton! He brought Will home. He is cold and wet—”

“He can take himself home in a hackney. I’m sure we’re obliged to Stapleton for bringing Will, but this is no time to be playing hostess.”

And so Maud soothed her mother, mingling tears with tears, until the elder finally fell asleep on the younger’s shoulder before morning’s light. And laying her down gingerly upon the sofa, Maud slipped away to the library with a handkerchief and eyes as dry as an empty riverbed.

O

AS THE BUTLER ushered them into the townhouse, Pevensey stood a discreet arm’s length behind Sir Richard. After all, although it was apparent to both men that the magistrate meant to foist the case on his eager subordinate, Lady Aldine’s summons had not officially included *him*—and indeed, the summons had not even indicated that there *was* a case. The morning room to which the butler admitted them glowed with a pale light coming through the windows, and the lady sitting on the settee was paler still. “How do you do, Sir Richard?” she said, rising to meet them. Pevensey was familiar enough with the ton to see that this was *not* Lady Aldine.

“Ah, Lady Worlington,” said Sir Richard with aplomb. “I had *heard* that you were back in town.” Pevensey was expecting a compliment to form on the magistrate’s lips, but even such a consummate flirt as Sir Richard had the sense to curtail the pleasantries when death was in the air. “Your mother sent word for me to wait on her this morning.”

Lady Worlington gave a wan smile. “I am afraid I took the liberty of writing that note in her name. Will you please sit down?”

“Of course,” said Sir Richard finding a seat directly opposite Lady Worlington and crossing his legs elegantly. “This is my associate, Jacob Pevensey.”

Pevensey bobbed his head in greeting and took a thinly upholstered chair in the background.

“A pleasure to meet you,” said Lady Worlington, although Pevensey could see that pleasure was the last thing on her mind as she mulled over how to introduce the next subject.

“You wanted to tell me something of great urgency?” said Sir

Richard helpfully.

"Indeed. My brother was drowned last night in a boating accident on the Thames. I am not sure of the usual course of action in such events, but I assumed the authorities ought to be notified."

"Quite right," said Sir Richard, affecting a soothing tone. "My sincere condolences, Lady Worlington. How many were involved in the accident?"

The lady hesitated. "I'm afraid I don't know any of the details. My cousin, Stapleton Aldine, was there and brought Will—his body—home."

"Perhaps your cousin or your father is more aware of the circumstances…."

Pevensey grinned inwardly. As much as Sir Richard might enjoy the company of the fairer sex, he was notorious for assuming that common sense was a monopoly held by his own kind.

"My father is insensible at present. The shock of Will's death sent him into a coma last night."

From his vantage point, Pevensey could see Sir Richard's mouth drop open a little as he was rendered speechless by this new revelation. There was nothing he could do but offer his condolences once again.

The door to the morning room opened suddenly and without ceremony. "Maudie!"

Lady Worlington rose to her feet, and Pevensey and Sir Richard followed suit, as a dark-coated gentleman burst into the room.

"I came as soon as I received your note!" The man paused, looking around the room. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen. I can only assume you are here about the recent events." He executed a perfunctory bow.

"Indeed," said Sir Richard his lined face contorting into an expression of sadness. "And you are?"

"Ralph Aldine. I suppose my face must not be as familiar to you as yours is to me, Sir Richard."

Pevensey conjectured—rightly, as the following conversation confirmed—that the fellow was a solicitor. Who was he? Another cousin?

"And where is your office?" Sir Richard inquired.

"At St. James's."

"A good location—"

"If we might, sir," Pevensey interjected, "would it be possible to examine the body?"

All three men looked at Lady Worlington. “Of course,” she said with a shudder. “I’ve had him carried to his room. Ralph, will you take them up?”

It was clear that Lady Worlington had no wish to be present for the examination. When they arrived in the room, a cursory glance at the body confirmed just how distracted the household had been during the dual tragedies that occurred the previous night. The poor, drowned man was still in his boots and sodden clothes, his bedraggled cravat wrapped around his throat like a piece of seaweed. The whole room smelled as dank as a cell at Newgate. Pevensey advanced to look at the face more closely while Sir Richard and Ralph Aldine hung back. Sir Richard could deduce things well enough from an armchair, but he was not interested in obtaining empirical evidence of this sort.

Pevensey loosened the cravat, turning the head this way and that to get a better view of the victim’s bare neck. He felt along the hairline and scalp with the tips of his fingers. He picked up the hand and examined the wrist beneath the cuffs and each fingernail at length. “Mr. Aldine,” he said. “Do you think it would be all right if I were to examine the whole of the body?”

“Of course,” said Ralph Aldine, his eyes filled with a mist of tears that exuded compassion rather than weakness.

“Erm, yes,” said Sir Richard. “Pevensey will be handling matters from here. I must take my leave of Lady Worlington and return to Bow Street, but I will await his report and let the family know if anything further must be done.”

Pevensey raised a red eyebrow. He had never seen Sir Richard so eminently uncomfortable. Apparently, the Chief Magistrate of London was squeamish about the sight of a dead body. Well, Pevensey was not. He had seen enough corpses in his line of work to be inured to embarrassment where death was concerned.

Sir Richard disappeared out the bedroom door. Without waiting to be asked, the solicitor opened the wardrobe and found a long nightshirt that they could drape over the body and set himself to the difficult task of prying off the boots. Pevensey stared at Ralph Aldine’s teeth-gritted profile and then glanced back at the face of the corpse. “Was he your…brother?” Sir Richard had said the dead man was his father’s only heir, but there was something too similar about the two men to be utterly ignored.

“Half-brother. Born on the right side of the blanket.”

Pevensey kept his eyes on the buttons of the waistcoat and kept

his tone light. “Were you close?”

“I handled his financial affairs. I like to think he relied on me.” One of the boots came off with a loud sucking sound.

Pevensey tried to lift the body at the shoulders and bend it forward for easier removal of the layers of clothing, but the stiffness of the corpse made this impossible. Fortunately, the wide, open neck of the shirt allowed him to see much of the victim’s shoulders and torso. All was white and pale, the muscles of the chest indicating a man who was fit but unconcerned about increasing his fitness through regular sport. “What have we here?” said Pevensey, under his breath. His fingers brushed over a recently closed wound right where the left arm joined the body. A blade had entered here, and less than a fortnight ago. Pevensey pulled his notebook out of a pocket in his coat and made a quick sketch of the injury.

Ralph Aldine staggered backwards as the second boot released its hold on the foot and sat down in a nearby chair.

“Did your brother have any enemies?” Pevensey put the notebook away.

“Will? Hardly. He might have exasperated a few people, but I don’t think anyone would call him an enemy.”

“Was he set upon by footpads recently? Or engaged in a duel?”

“Why do you ask?” The solicitor’s voice was guarded.

Pevensey gestured at the freshly-healed wound on the left shoulder.

Ralph Aldine hesitated. “His valet would know better than I. I have my own residence, of course, so I am not always familiar with Will’s comings and goings. If you will excuse me, I really must look in on my father now. I will make arrangements for an undertaker to finish….” He gestured at the half-dressed body and then turned his eyes away.

“Ah, yes, of course,” said Pevensey, refraining from pressing his last question. Perhaps the fellow really didn’t know. Or perhaps a solicitor knew better than anyone how to evade a question that might provoke unpleasant inquiries. In any case, he could hardly keep the man from visiting his father’s sickbed. It was an unheard-of blow for a family to lose the one legitimate scion and the paterfamilias in one day—and the coincidence alone was enough to make Pevensey suspect that there was something havey-cavey about the whole business.

In any case, he would call upon the cousin who had been there during the boating incident. An eyewitness would be the best way to

determine if William Aldine's death was just an unfortunate accident or if malice and murder came into play.

CHAPTER 19

Ralph walked up the stairs with leaden step. When he entered the room, Lady Aldine was sitting silently on the sofa, her tense hand clutching Maud's like a claw. A middle-aged nurse was pottering around the bedroom, adjusting bedclothes and straightening piles of books. There was little for her to do with a patient so insensible. His father was breathing, shallowly, but there were no other signs of life.

"Oh, Ralph! I cannot bear to look at him," said Lady Aldine. And Ralph could see that since she was staring straight into her husband's sunken eyes, that she must be referring to Will. "His lips were so blue—his eyes so dark."

Ralph gently settled himself onto the other side of the sofa and took Lady Aldine's other hand in his. "I've sent off a note to the funeral furnisher to come put him to rights. I will handle all the arrangements."

"Bless you, my dear," said Lady Aldine, and she began to cry, a haggard, voiceless sob that wracked her whole frame. Ralph fished into his pocket for a handkerchief, and it occurred to him that for the first time, Juliana Aldine was beginning to look like an old woman.

"And then your father too." She sniffed into the handkerchief. Ralph remembered all the times this woman had rocked him to sleep, lifted him down from the carriage, offered him sweetmeats during church.

"It will be all right, Mother." He had not called her that for twenty years or more—not since his father had told him his place in the world and how differently the world would treat him than the pink and white baby that Lady Aldine was holding in her arms. There had been a difference since Will was born—not in the way Juliana viewed him, but in the way his father viewed him, in the way he viewed himself. He was no longer an equal member of the family but a bastard they had taken in, a charity case who must earn his keep through service to the family.

Ralph could see Maud blinking back a few tears. Maud had never

understood exactly how deep the chasm was between him and the other children—or, she had understood and just refused to accept it. He remembered her fierce little voice demanding, "Why won't you call her Mama anymore?"

"Because she is not my Mama!"

"How can you say that? Of course she is. She tells you your bedtime stories and scolds you for getting dirty, doesn't she?"

Ralph stared at the still form of his father and at the remnant of his family on the sofa. "It will be all right," he repeated. As the family solicitor, however, he knew that his words were but false comfort. If Viscount Aldine died, life would become infinitely different for his stepmother and Maud.

"You may take a rest," said Lady Aldine to the nurse. "There is nothing for you to do here at present." The aproned woman bobbed a curtsy and disappeared from the room.

They sat in silence for a moment until the butler rapped gently against the door. "I beg your pardon, but there is a gentleman downstairs asking for Lady Worlington. I gave him to understand that the house is in mourning, but he says you are expecting him."

Ralph could see a spark light in Maud's eyes. Her tired cheeks regained a wave of color. She gently deposited Lady Aldine's hand on her own lap and rose from the couch. "Let me look in my glass a moment and then I will be down directly."

"What gentleman is this?" asked Lady Aldine after Maud had left the room, her womanly curiosity only dampened but not extinguished by recent events.

Ralph rose from the couch and walked toward the window. "If I am not mistaken, Lord Tilbury is the man." He lifted the lace curtain and peered down at the street below. The carriage below was unfamiliar. A terrible suspicion began to grow in Ralph's breast. "Egad, I *am* mistaken." He begged leave to be excused and exited the room with considerable haste. Maud must be found immediately, before it was too late.

O

AFTER A NIGHT of no sleep except the few minutes she had snatched against the back of an armchair, Maud's hair was a sight. She instructed Perkins to recoif it.

"A new dress as well, my lady?"

Maud looked down at the crumpled green crepe. She had forgotten the state of her clothing. “Yes, but quickly! Oh, and I suppose it must be blacks!” The week of color that she had enjoyed must give way again to the conventions of bereavement.

An eternity passed until she was able to emerge from her bedroom in a simple black day dress with her hair pinned up decorously. Her pace quickened as she traversed the corridor. He was waiting downstairs! He was here!

At the top of the stairs, a shadow stepped out and seized her elbow.

“Oh! Heavens, Ralph, you frightened me!”

“Maud, listen to me,” he said speaking swiftly. “It is not Tilbury downstairs. It is Victor Worlington.”

Her face, which had just regained some of its life, fell back to its ashen pallor. She opened her mouth but was unable to speak.

“Stay upstairs. Let me talk with him.”

“No,” said Maud, summoning up some of her native spirit. “It is a scrape of my own making. Let *me* face the consequences.”

“Then at least let me go with you.”

She sighed. “I suppose you already know the most shameful parts, so there is nothing you need not hear.”

He offered her his arm and she took it. Together, they entered the morning room where Victor Worlington was waiting.

“Ah, back in mourning, I see,” said Victor, his round face grinning like a scarecrow.

“We’ve had a death in the family,” said Maud stiffly. “My brother —”

“I’ve heard. It seems you no longer need wait in London for a wedding to take place. What I have not heard is your answer to my invitation.” The man was an absolute monster—he’d heard of Will’s death and still pursued his schemes?

“To your blackmail, I think you mean.” Maud swallowed and put on a bravado that she did not at all feel. She gathered the folds of her black day dress, crushing the skirt in one hand. “I will not be returning to Devon anytime soon.”

Victor sneered. “Then in that case,”—his reedy voice filled the room—“I shall be obliged to publish a certain epistle to the whole of London. Have you told your bastard brother what’s written in it?” He looked at Ralph slyly. “It is quite lurid, Aldine. Very scandalous stuff.”

“I care little about the contents of the letter,” said Ralph. His

compact frame looked frail across from Victor's sturdy physique. "I only care that you desist from harassing my sister and leave her to grieve in peace. Blood and thunder, man! Our brother has just died. Our father may very well be on his death bed. Have you no milk of human kindness in you?"

"No more kindness than your dear sister had to a doting husband who trusted her with all his heart." Victor turned back toward Maud. "He thought you as chaste as Diana, my dear Mama. But what a barque of frailty you turned out to be. You need minding, Madame Widow, so you do not tarnish his memory even further."

Ralph lifted his right hand and slapped Victor Worlington across the cheekbone. "How dare you, sir." Each word was as pointed as the tip of a sword.

Victor, built like a bull, barely winced at the assault. "What is this, Aldine? Some misguided attempt to protect your sister's honor? Etiquette demands that I refuse one of your…parentage. And even if I were to accept, pistols at dawn would hardly be in your favor."

Maud was the one wincing now. What was Ralph thinking! Victor could hit a barn swallow through the eye at a hundred paces. He was not the sort of man one challenged to a duel.

Victor cleared his throat. "You really ought to support this scheme, Aldine." He licked his lips and stared at Maud in a way that was not at all pleasant. "Your sister is so hot-blooded that she will do your family's reputation mischief as well as mine." He addressed her directly now. "I intend to finish out the rest of the days of Christmas in London, and I expect you to join me on the return trip to Devon. The neighborhood will be pleased to hear of your return."

Maud opened her mouth to protest, but Victor held up a thick finger to her lips. "No arguments, my dear Mama. Just think it over—a respectable widowhood in Devon, or a notorious fall into scandal in London."

"Get out," said Ralph hoarsely. Maud could see his hands shaking, no doubt with frustration at his own impotence and inability to make this menace disappear. Her own hands were slack with the resignation of despair, and all her remaining strength was being used to keep the stricken state of her soul from surfacing on her face.

Victor seized his beaver from the end table. He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Until Epiphany, Mama." And then he disappeared out the door of the morning room, too smug a presence for the Aldines' house of mourning.

As soon as he had departed, Maud collapsed onto the couch. She had thought herself strong enough to spar with whatever life brought her way, but the quick rat-a-tat of so many blows at once had knocked the wind out of her.

"Are you all right, Maudie?" asked Ralph. He too looked spent and weary.

"Just a little blue-deviled," Maud replied. At least Lord Tilbury was coming today. He had promised to call. He would be here shortly. And though her head asked her what the deuce a young pup of one-and-twenty could do about her troubles, her heart whispered that somehow, Geoffrey Angiers would put all things to right.

O

"THANK YOU FOR coming," said Geoffrey. It was the first time he had expressed that sentiment to Edwina Cecil and meant it, but then, he had never before had to deal with a tragedy of this magnitude. Helena had shut herself in her room, but the crying had not stopped. Indeed, her grief was so intense Geoffrey was beginning to fear she would do herself an injury.

"Of course," said Miss Cecil, her blue eyes alive with sympathy. "I'll go to her at once." She flitted up the stairs and down the corridor leaving her brother and Geoffrey standing silently in the entrance hall.

"Deuced awful," said Cecil, shaking his black curly head. "You were there?"

"Aye. It was pitch black. Will was dead drunk. And the boat disappeared from under us with barely a warning."

"Hmm." Cecil leaned an arm against the wall. "Do you suspect foul play?"

"I don't know what to suspect…." Geoffrey began to pace the room. "Perhaps! I didn't feel the wherry strike anything. It's as if the hull was stove in!"

Cecil wrinkled his nose. "Listen, I know a fellow at Bow Street. I could look him up and see what he recommends."

"I'd be much obliged," said Geoffrey. Cecil nodded and put on his beaver. Geoffrey cast a glance up the stairs. Helena would be closeted with her friend for hours. Perhaps now was the time for him to call on the Aldine house and see how they—oh, dash it all!—to see how *Lady Worlington* was taking the tragedy. He beckoned to a footman to fetch his own beaver and greatcoat. "I'll drop you at Bow Street," he said to

Cecil. After making the circuitous trip, Geoffrey's carriage pulled up in front of the Aldine house in Grosvenor Square. The wheels eased to a halt behind a parked carriage. Another caller was here ahead of him. Geoffrey peered out the clouded window. Perhaps the news of Will's demise had already begun to spread, and these were friends come to offer their condolences. A gentleman in a frock coat and beaver descended the stairs of the house, his sturdy frame taking the steps jauntily, two at a time. Geoffrey wiped a little of the fog away from the glass.

Recognition came, and with it disgust. Geoffrey's teeth clenched. It seemed that Victor Worlington was subjecting Lady Worlington to his odious presence less than half a day after Will's demise!

With its passenger stowed away, the carriage in front of him began to roll away into the rain. Geoffrey alerted his own driver to a change of plans. They would follow the carriage in front of them—at a safe distance—until they discovered where Victor Worlington lodged.

As they passed by the Aldine house, Geoffrey cast a regretful look. He had told Lady Worlington he would call today—it was unconscionable of him to renege on that promise. But the appearance of Victor Worlington had reminded him of a far more solemn promise and a charge that he had resolved to carry out. And if all went according to plan he would have to put off his visit to the Aldine house a good while longer. He could not be seen in Lady Worlington's presence if the mask he was about to put on was to acquire any appearance of verisimilitude.

O

AFTER MAKING INQUIRIES, Pevensey took a hackney to Mr. Stapleton Aldine's house in Berkeley Square. The owner was at home, and surprisingly, answered the door himself. Pevensey had no sooner introduced himself as an adjunct of the magistrates' office than a young fellow lurking in the back of the entrance hall cast a wary look in his direction and hurried up the stairs.

"My sole scion, Eustace," said Stapleton, waving a hand at the back of the pimple-faced youth. Pevensey noted that the man's puffy fingers looked unused to labor of any kind. "He's kicked up enough larks at Oxford to be anxious around policemen. Please, let us sit in my library."

"Of course, Mr. Aldine," said Pevensey. Despite the father's

comment, he refrained from placing the son in his black books immediately. Trust was not always easy to come by in his line of work, and mistrust did not always mean a guilty conscience.

The library had an impressive array of leather-bound titles—however, they were so glossy that Pevensey knew they must either be unread volumes or simply false spines designed for show. He wondered what else in this cozy house was merely a front with no substance.

"So," said Stapleton Aldine, offering him a seat, "you must be here about the sad business on the Thames? Deplorable! Utterly deplorable!"

"Quite so," said Pevensey. "You brought the body home, I understand?" He reached into his coat and pulled out his sketchbook.

"I weep to say the words, but yes, it was I. Lord Tilbury, young William, and I were the three involved in the accident."

"And the boatman of course. What was his name?"

"Dear me, I didn't exchange calling cards with him. It was a boat ride, not a social call, Mr. Pevensey."

Upon being pressed, Mr. Aldine could provide no further description of the man other than medium in height with a drab woolen hat. Pevensey mused over the self-absorbed lack of observation in the upper class and moved on to a new topic.

"What caused the accident?"

Mr. Aldine groaned. "I hardly know. The helmsman must have been careless indeed—marring the vessel on some protuberance."

Pevensey began to sketch the subject as he sat there speaking, his fat, white hands gesticulating with his overblown oratory.

"Did you feel the boat hit a rock?"

"I am not sure, but I was quite occupied with propping up my cousin, so I cannot judge the matter with certitude."

"So you were holding onto Mr. Will Aldine when the boat submerged?"

"No, no," said the portly cousin. "He had lurched away from me, and I was capsized on the opposite side of the boat. We were nowhere near each other in the water."

It was the most straightforward thing he had said through the whole of the interview and a bewilderingly precise statement for a man who would have been disoriented by darkness and the frigid water.

Pevensey let it pass and moved on. "And when you removed the

victim to his home, was his father the viscount awake when you arrived?"

"The butler hastened to fetch him, and he came down within a few moments, albeit in his dressing gown."

"He must have been very affected by the sight of the body?"

"Oh, most indubitably. He collapsed. Lady Aldine barely caught hold of him before his head hit the floor."

"Did he have a weak heart?"

"I believe so."

Pevensey paused his questions long enough to finish his sketch. He shut the book with alacrity and stood up. "One last thing, Mr. Aldine. Is there anyone who might have wished your cousin ill?"

"William? Oh, certainly not. He was an unexceptional lad—straight as an arrow. We all doted on him."

"I see," said Pevensey, not at all sure that Stapleton Aldine's praise of the victim was genuine. "I must bid you good day, Mr. Aldine. I'll call again should I have any more questions."

"Yes, yes, never hesitate," said the ponderous fellow. "I am only too happy to oblige if you think my poor answers can offer you a modicum of information."

CHAPTER 20

"Ho there, Pevensey!" said an excited voice.

Pevensey, entering the tall doors of the Bow Street office, looked up in surprise to see a pair of curling black sideburns and an eager smile. "Well met, Mr. Cecil! I did not expect to see you in London."

"But of course! I told you we were due to visit during the holidays."

Pevensey's freckled face suffused with pleasure. He made few friends in the course of his investigations, and although he and Cecil had grown close during last summer's investigation in Sussex, he had tacitly assumed that a member of the gentry would never willingly seek to further their acquaintance.

"My sister is here as well."

Pevensey tried to keep his face blank. For him, the intelligent and lovely Miss Cecil had been no small part of Sussex's charms.

Cecil, eyes wide, looked around the vaulted ceilings of the Bow Street office. "We're visiting a friend of hers, and I'm afraid something of a tragedy has taken place that we could use your expertise on."

"Of course," said Pevensey. His excitement at seeing the young Sussex magistrate abated a little. Of course Cecil's visit was not simply for friendship's sake. Of course he needed something from Pevensey. It would be presumptuous for a Bow Street Runner to expect that their relationship could be anything other than an unequal one.

"The long and the short of it is that her friend's betrothed was in a boating accident last night—a fatal one."

Pevensey cocked his head. "You're speaking of Viscount Aldine's son?"

"Yes, that's it exactly! You've already heard? It's not in the papers yet."

"Indeed, I've been to their town house this morning. Is your sister's friend concerned that the accident might have been… arranged?"

"I don't know what Lady Helena thinks, but her brother Lord

Tilbury has that notion in his head. He was there in the boat last night, along with—"

"—Stapleton Aldine. I've just come from his house."

"Well done. I can see you've already found the lay of the land." Cecil folded his arms. "And what's your initial assessment of the matter?"

Pevensey pursed his lips. "I think it bears looking into. I've explained as much to Sir Richard, the head magistrate. He agrees, and I have my remit."

Cecil grinned. "And might I be of service in the investigation?"

"What?" Pevensey grinned back. "Are you tired of playing the tourist in town?"

"Rather," Cecil admitted. "And I suspect Edwina shall be closeted with Lady Helena for the next several days, so I might as well make myself useful."

Pevensey debated with himself. Everyone at Bow Street knew that he liked to work alone on an investigation. But at the same time, Cecil *had* proven himself useful at Harrowhaven last summer. And by working closely with her brother, there was a possibility Pevensey would encounter Miss Cecil once again….

"Very well then," he said, "but don't expect to visit for tea in any fine houses. You'll be going down to the dirtiest docks in London to root out information, and you'll have to be crafty as a customs inspector."

Cecil's eyes lit with excitement. "Willingly. What are the facts of the case so far?"

The room began to throng with gabbling onlookers as the court in one of the adjacent rooms dismissed.

Unable to hear each other's voices, Pevensey nodded to Cecil and they ducked into one of the private adjoining rooms where the only sound was a secretary scratching away with his pen. Pevensey gestured to a set of armchairs by the window, and the two men took up seats opposite each other.

"The facts of the matter are that last night between midnight and one o'clock, a wherry went down in the Thames. The passengers of the wherry were: William Aldine, Stapleton Aldine, Lord Tilbury, and an unnamed boatman. Stapleton Aldine and Lord Tilbury survived the event by swimming to shore, William Aldine's body was recovered shortly after the event, and the boatman has yet to be located."

"Given that he was familiar with the Thames, would not one

assume that the boatman would be the likeliest of the four to survive?"

"One would assume so. It is possible he swam to shore further downriver. The plan is to post a reward for information concerning the fellow and canvas the rest of the boatmen for clues as to his identity. The Runners are not well-liked among the river folk, however. Would *you* take on this task?"

"Certainly. Do you think the boatman had some grudge against the gentlemen in the boating party?"

"Hardly likely. But he would know if his boat had been sabotaged." Pevensey reached into his pocket and pulled out his sketchbook. "In the meantime, I will continue my interviews of those involved." He looked at Cecil narrowly. "Are you close friends with Lord Tilbury?"

"Not overly," said Cecil with a wave of his hand. "We've been thrown together a good deal because of our sisters, but I daresay the man thinks me as dull as a hedgerow. He's quite the Corinthian with his fencing skills, and a fair hand with gardening, opera, poetry. He's up for a membership at the Eccentrics' club. I must confess, I feel quite the country bumpkin around him. He's been kind, though, to show us about London. We were to visit the British Museum today had this tragedy not occurred."

Pevensey nodded. It was curious that he himself had also encountered Lord Tilbury in the past week. For it was Lord Tilbury whom he had confronted at Angelo's just three days ago with the rumors about illicit dueling. And now, the drowning victim had borne a recent wound from a blade. Was there a connection? "Can you think of any reason why Tilbury would carry a grudge against Will Aldine?"

"Tilbury? I should think not. I mean, Edwina did give me to understand that he wasn't keen on the match between Aldine and Lady Helena, but I hardly think a man would do murder over that. There are other ways to break a betrothal."

"Indeed." Pevensey mused a second. "Come, let's go round to my flat. I'll lend you some clothes for the waterfront. And you'd better drop that Eton accent while we're at it."

Cecil screwed up his face into a grimace. "Right y'are, Mr. Pev'nsey."

"Hmm…not bad," said Pevensey, rising from his armchair. "Just don't overdo it."

Cecil stood as well and adopted a surly slouch. "No chance o' that

I'm thinkin'."

O

GEOFFREY FOLLOWED SIR Victor until his carriage pulled up in front of the grand entrance to Maurice's. The hotel's new owner, the Duke of Brockenhurst, was not averse to a bout of fencing at Angelo's, and Geoffrey had dined here at Maurice's with the duke once or twice. He had no interest in the hotel's owner today, however—his entire attention was fixed on the odious stepson of Maud Worlington.

Geoffrey breathed deeply and massaged the tense jaw beneath his golden sideburns. He had never considered himself much of an actor, but now it was time to put on his finest performance. And after all, what was a swordplay feint other than a bit of acting? In a few moments, he would be conducting the most daring feint of his life.

After waiting in his carriage a few moments, Geoffrey mounted the steps to the hotel. He asked the maitre'd for a newspaper and a table and sat down in the half-full dining room. The Saturday edition of the *St. James's Chronicle* had no mention of the boating disaster from the night before—it would be all over the papers come Monday. As he scanned the paper, Geoffrey kept half an eye out for Sir Victor, still unsure exactly how he would initiate conversation once the gentleman *did* descend from his room. He caught sight of a table of red-coated officers. Remembering that Worlington had but lately sold out of the cavalry, he picked up his paper and strolled in the officers' direction. It was a lucky move. Within seconds, Sir Victor had reappeared and was hailed by one of the officers, his path intersecting with Geoffrey's.

"I say, Sir Victor!" said Geoffrey, feigning a look of surprise. "It's not in the papers yet, so I don't suppose you've heard the *news* about Will Aldine."

"The news—ah, yes," said Worlington, his round face registering annoyance at being importuned. "I did hear and called on the family this morning and expressed my condolences."

"Did you know him well?" asked Geoffrey, falling in step with Sir Victor as he moved toward his friends.

"Not at all. Did you? Oh, I forget—he was to marry your sister, eh, Tilbury?"

Geoffrey gave a little laugh with a hard edge to it. "Unfortunately, yes. But that *mésalliance* is over now—thank heaven."

That caught Sir Victor's attention. He paused and waved a hand to

his friends, indicating that he would join them momentarily. “You did not like the fellow, I take it?”

“What was there to like? A boorish lout and a bad hand with both women and cards. But my sister *would* have him, and I could not say her nay. Well, I don’t have to now, do I? The good Lord’s done the office for me.”

Sir Victor grunted. “You’re more right than you know. The family’s tainted, the whole pack of them. I wish to God that vixen had never entrapped my father with her wiles.”

“Vixen? You mean Lady Worlington?” Geoffrey affected some confusion.

“Of course I mean her. Surely, you must have noticed what a bit of muslin she pretends to be?”

Geoffrey swallowed down his bile and willed his hands not to clench into fists. “Aye, now that you mention it, she *has* been a little free in her manner.” He gave Sir Victor a wink. “Not that I minded. Widows enjoy certain…liberties.”

Sir Victor gave a guffaw. “Well, should you try to enjoy them on your own terms, you’ll find the little minx as self-righteous as a parson. She’ll ring a fine peal over you for your presumption—never mind the fact that she so coyly advertises what apparently isn’t for sale.”

Geoffrey smirked, the crooked smile on his face covering the murderous thoughts lurking in his mind. How dare this swine speak thus of Lady Worlington! Clearly Sir Victor had assayed his stepmother’s virtue at some point or another—Geoffrey had no interest in speculating whether the event had occurred before or after his father’s death. And now this debauched rake was demanding that Lady Worlington return to his estate in Devon?

Geoffrey stilled a growl that rose in his throat. He gave his finest devil-may-care shrug. “I thank you for the advice—I’ve no interest in having a sermon read to me. As you say, perhaps widows are more trouble than they’re worth. I find that actresses are more my style.” He cast a glance over to the table of red-coat officers who were looking in their direction. “But don’t let me keep you—you have friends waiting.”

Sir Victor glanced over to the table. “Aye.” He clapped Geoffrey on the back, all aloofness having disappeared in their common disparagement of Lady Worlington. “Join us for a drink?”

“Oh, rather! Good of you to offer,” said Geoffrey. He could not

remember the last time he had swilled a glass of alcohol so early in the day. He took a seat at the table with a group of England's worthiest cavalrymen and spent a distasteful hour exchanging bawdy jokes and assessing the charms of the leading ladies of the London stage. Geoffrey could not resist a look around to ensure that no one he knew was in the dining room. He would be in sore need of a bath when he returned home, but for now, he must wallow in the mire until they thought him one of them.

At last, he could take no more of it and stood to make his farewells.

"You must join us tonight for cards," said Sir Victor.

Geoffrey breathed deeply and accepted the invitation. All was well. His plan was working.

As he walked down the steps of Maurice's, he reminded himself that the only reason he did not set a fist to Worlington's fleshy face right now was that a much greater reckoning was on its way—if only he had the skill needed to bring that reckoning about.

O

PEVENSEY GRINNED NERVOUSLY as he walked down the street. He felt like a father apprenticing his young progeny to a tradesman and then walking home for the first time without the lad trailing beside him. He had provided Cecil with some old woolens and pointed him in the direction of the docks. The fellow was bright and energetic, but who knew how well he could play his part in front of the roughest segment of society in the metropolis?

Meanwhile, Pevensey's feet were taking him to his own dubious destination. It would be inaccurate, however, to say that Pevensey was unfamiliar with the back halls of the King's Theatre. The ladybirds there had proved useful to Bow Street on more than one occasion as informants.

"Hello there, Dolly," he said, tipping his hat to the first actress to trip across his path. He added a wink as well, fairly certain what coin would gain him entrance at an establishment that, for all its theatrical pretensions, was little better than a brothel.

"Why, Jake Pevensey!" she said, dipping a flirtatiously bare shoulder. Her theater makeup was only half done, with one eye painted in a perpetual surprised look and the other eye naked as Eve. "What brings you to the King's Theatre?"

“Your pretty face, of course,” said Pevensey, and he gave her a buss on the cheek. She would have returned in kind, but he forestalled her. “Tell me, is anyone missing a sweetheart lately?”

The buxom Dolly sighed, her unpainted eye drooping in disappointment. “That’ll be Libby. Lawks, I might’ve known you weren’t here to see me.”

“Well, I can hardly say I’m here on business when it’s such a pleasure,” said Pevensey, offering her his arm and eliciting a giggle. “But yes, I do have a case. If you would be good enough to show me Miss Libby’s room?”

The actress named Libby was in bed with a pillow over her head. Pevensey shooed Dolly away but left the door open a crack, sensitive to the niceties of propriety even though they did not usually apply in a place such as this. “My condolences, miss,” he said, taking the one seat in the small chamber without waiting to be asked.

Libby, with a head full of disheveled hair the color of ripe wheat, peeked out from underneath the bedclothes. “Lud! Who’re you?” she demanded.

“Jacob Pevensey, attached to the Bow Street Magistrates’ office, at your service.”

The young woman sat up in her bed and pulled her wrapper around herself. “What’s this all about?”

“I believe you were acquainted with the son of Viscount Aldine.”

“And what if I were? He’s dead now!”

“Indeed,” said Pevensey, with a good deal more sympathy than he felt. “And I was hoping you could shed some light on the reasons as to why this might have occurred?”

“Reasons? Lud, I s’pose the reasons were he was dead drunk and he fell in the Thames.”

“Did you have an arrangement with Mr. Aldine?”

The actress sniffed. “I s’pose you might call it that. He was fond of giving me expensive presents. And I allowed him certain…liberties.”

Her petulant lip curled so perfectly that Pevensey felt obliged to take out his sketchbook and record this meeting. “Are you aware that Mr. Aldine was engaged to be married in a fortnight?”

“T’wouldn’t have changed nothing! His ’trothed was a dead bore. He said so himself. Would’ve jumped to jilt her if he could. You think he was going to give me up? I ’spect he’d have visited me *more*, not less.”

Pevensey’s pencil finished the curve of her face. He recollected

that any man would say as much about his fiancée to his mistress. Still, it bore more investigation—was Will Aldine really averse to marrying Helena Angiers? If so, what had precipitated the engagement? His father? Her money?

"Who sent you word that Mr. Aldine had drowned?"

She sunk back down in the bedclothes and threw a dramatic arm across her face. "Johnny. He's Will's valet—or *was*. Will used to send him sometimes with messages for me, or presents."

"Speaking of presents," said Dolly, pushing open the door with her backside—clearly, she had been standing outside to listen to the conversation—"some rich cove's sent over a token of his admiration." She handed Libby an immense hothouse bouquet which overflowed from her arms onto the bed where she sat.

"What does the note say?" Libby demanded, squealing at the magnitude of the gift.

Dolly squinted at the card which accompanied the flowers. "Lord Fremont looks forward to your performance tonight and to waiting upon you afterward." Dolly hesitated. "But weren't you still indisposed after all this drowning business? Your understudy's warming up her voice for the part."

"What? Certainly not," said Libby, springing out of bed in a chemise and wrapper that barely went past her knees. "I will be at the performance—please tell Lord Fremont's messenger, if he is still waiting to receive a reply." The actress lifted a hand to smooth down her yellow hair. "If you'll excuse me, Mr. Pevensey." She glanced pointedly at the door.

Pevensey accepted the dismissal with a bow and was soon out on the street below the King's Theatre. He scratched his red sideburns thoughtfully. He had uncovered nothing so far to suggest foul play, but the valet might certainly be of some help. He had yet to interview Lord Tilbury, and once Cecil reported back from the docks, there might be more breadcrumbs to follow.

The Eighth Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 21

The next day was Sunday. Maud woke early, much too early, and pulled the covers over her head. She had been waiting for him all of yesterday, and for all of yesterday he had not come. The funeral furnisher with his band of associates had knocked on the door, but the Duke of Tilbury—for all his promises—had kept his distance.

Maud hardly knew what to make of it. Surely, he had not recalled her note to cease sending parcels and making calls and decided to heed it *now*?

Ralph had gone home for a shave and a change of clothing, and Lady Aldine had surrendered her husband's care to the nurse so she might close her own eyes a spell. There was no question of attending church services on such a day. Maud lay abed until even the bed was no longer comforting and then rose to bathe and dress in black again.

Dr. Bowles arrived again to look in on the patient, but after seeing no sign of improvement, he only shook his head gravely. "It's in the Lord's hands," he said. "Either he'll wake up in the next day or two, or he'll wake to the last trumpet."

Ralph had returned by then for another meeting with the funeral furnisher that Maud joined in on. It felt strange to discuss business with a tradesman on a Sunday, but then, it was already the second day after the death. Even with the coldness of the season, the body must be moved on the morrow if they did not want it to decay within the house.

Will's funeral procession was to be a far showier affair than Humboldt's funeral out in Devon had been—four black horses, a black carriage, enough black crepe to wrap a castle in, an elm coffin, six pall bearers, six pages, two mutes. "And before the graveyard ceremony, a reception here at the house?" asked Mr. Whittle, the funeral arranger. He sniffled a little and sneezed into his handkerchief.

Maud hesitated. "I don't know—a reception here with Father lying upstairs 'twixt life and death?"

"We shall have it," said a quavery voice. Lady Aldine, hollow-eyed

and gaunt, floated into the room without ceremony. “Will would have wanted a bright send-off, and your father shall be more comfortable upstairs than he has ever been during one of our receptions—he shall not hear a thing to disturb him.”

“Shall we send a message round to Helena?” said Ralph, with a shade of awkwardness in his voice.

Maud’s stomach contracted. To Helena…and to her elder brother as well. Surely, Lord Tilbury must come to view the body even if he failed to come yesterday or today.

“Of course we shall,” said Lady Aldine. “And to as many family friends as are in town.” She dabbed at her face with a handkerchief. “Oh, poor dear Helena! She must be feeling Will’s loss as acutely as the rest of us.”

“Or even more so,” Ralph murmured. “If you write up the card, I’ll take it round.”

Mr. Whittle soon departed after another round of sniffling sneezes with the notes for the funeral arrangement stuffed into his black waistcoat.

Lady Aldine blinked back a fresh round of tears and disappeared to her writing desk to prepare the unwelcome invitations. Maud laid a hand on Ralph’s arm. “Perhaps I should go with you to the Angiers’ to see how Helena—how *all* of them are doing.”

Ralph’s eyes filled with sympathy, and he covered her white hand with his own. “Best to leave it be, Maudie. They’ll call on you when they’re ready. Helena is no doubt beside herself—Lord Tilbury could not leave her even if he wanted to.”

It was the very excuse Maud had been trying to convince herself of for the past twenty-four hours, but somehow, when coming from Ralph’s lips, it now became eminently plausible. She breathed a sigh of relief and the tension in her shoulders melted away. Of course, Ralph was right. Lord Tilbury would be here as soon as he possibly could. She disappeared to her writing desk to pen the Angiers’ invitation herself.

O

PEVENSEY’S FIST BEAT a tattoo on the door of Lord Tilbury’s house. He had tried calling on him twice yesterday, but the fellow was out both times. Apparently, his dousing in the Thames and the death of his sister’s fiancé had not curtailed any of his social activities. The bells of

most churches were done ringing for the day. Was it reasonable to expect him to be home on a Sunday afternoon?

The butler ushered him into the hall, without the raised eyebrow that sometimes attended a Bow Street Runner's appearance. It took only a few moments before the servant announced that Lord Tilbury was indeed at home and would receive him in the orangerie.

As Pevensey followed the butler through the corridors, he noted that the house was sparsely but elegantly decorated, the sleek lines of the furnishings betokening a masculine aesthetic. It was common knowledge that Lord Tilbury was a bachelor, but Pevensey found it intriguing that such a young man would be engaged in the direct oversight of his establishment. Was there no maiden aunt to assume that duty?

The butler opened the door leading into the glass walls of the orangerie, and Pevensey entered without any further announcement. No sooner had his foot crossed the threshold of the glass greenhouse than his nostrils were assaulted by the rank odor of animal excrement. Kneeling on the floor were two men: the long-legged duke in his shirtsleeves and buckskins and an older man in a dirt-crusted apron. Beside them was a wheelbarrow of horse leavings that they were carefully transferring into a large clay planter.

The duke looked up with a wry smile. "Mr. Pevensey, is it? Good afternoon. I would shake your hand, but I fear you would not forgive me for it. We are almost done here, and then I shall be at leisure to answer your questions."

"Oh, carry on, my lord," said Pevensey. He pulled out his notebook and began to sketch, certain that he would never again find a peer of England spreading fertilizer in such a manner with his own two hands.

"There," said the duke with finality, brushing the loose manure off his hands and rising to his feet. He wrinkled his nose. "A ripe smell, is it not?"

Pevensey nodded. It was as if all the lingering smells of the London streets had been concentrated in one tiny room. "I believe your lordship is even *more* in need of a bath than when we last met."

"Ah," said Tilbury, and Pevensey could see that although the duke remembered their previous encounter at Angelo's, he was not eager to return to that subject again.

"If you do not mind coming upstairs," said Tilbury, "I'll have my valet draw me that bath while we talk."

“As you wish, my lord,” said Pevensey. He shut his sketchbook and followed in the wake of the tall duke, leaving the aproned gardener to dispose of the extra fertilizer.

After ascending the staircase, Pevensey noted that Lord Tilbury’s valet had anticipated the need and a tub had already been set up near the fire with a screen to keep in the heat and maintain the bather’s privacy.

Pevensey took a seat in an armchair in Lord Tilbury’s room while a troop of footmen filled the tub with large cans of hot water. Then the duke, throwing his soiled clothing over the top of the screen, settled into the bath with a sigh.

“I imagine this bath is a little warmer than the Thames was two nights ago,” said Pevensey.

“Quite so,” said Lord Tilbury. “The shock of it made the water all the colder.”

“Did the boat strike against something?”

“Not at all. I think she was shipping water as soon as we came aboard, and then by the time we reached the middle of the river, she was completely scuttled and sank.”

“Scuttled? You think it was on purpose?”

“In my mind, yes. I don’t know how that boatman could have misunderstood what was happening. He knew the hole was there—or made the hole himself.”

“Why?” Pevensey pulled out his notebook and began to sketch the scene that was described.

“Dashed if I know,” said the duke, and Pevensey could hear the water slosh as he sat up higher in the tub.

“How did you make it ashore?”

“With great difficulty. I’m an indifferent swimmer at best, and in full evening gear, it was a near thing.”

“And the others?”

“Stapleton crawled on the bank right about when I did. And Will—I doubt he even knew what was happening, he was so foxed.”

Pevensey calculated the weight of his words and then tossed them into the tub with his listener. “Given his condition, some might say that it was your duty to save him.”

Lord Tilbury snorted. “My conscience is clear. Had it been daylight, I might have tried. But in the dark? I was almost drowned myself trying to reach the bank.”

“How was your relationship with William Aldine?”

Lord Tilbury stood up in the tub behind the screen, and his height allowed him to see squarely into Pevensey's eyes. "I did not care for him much—but my sister did, and they were to make a match of it." The tall man's valet handed him a cloth to dry himself. "Are you suggesting that *I* sabotaged the boat?"

"I suggest nothing," said Pevensey with a shrug. "I simply find the facts and let them suggest what they may."

He waited as the valet helped Lord Tilbury into a pair of buckskins and a long shirt, open at the collar. Then the freshly washed duke emerged from behind the screen to don his waistcoat, jacket, and boots.

"There is one curious thing," said Pevensey, looking down at his sketchbook and infusing his words with an air of nonchalance. "The body was decidedly dead from drowning, but when I examined it, there was a wound on the shoulder. And the facts suggest it was made by a sword." He looked up at Lord Tilbury, his gray eyes as frank as a child's. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

The duke stared at him. Pevensey could not tell whether the expression in his wide eyes was surprise, guilt, or a mixture of both.

"A recent wound?" asked the duke.

"A week or two old."

"How strange," murmured the duke, lifting his chin to allow his valet to tie his cravat.

Pevensey was too experienced an investigator not to notice that the duke had evaded the question. "You mentioned that you did not care much for the man."

The duke refused to take the bait.

"I wonder if your sister might know anything about the wound—"

"My sister is not to be bothered!" said the duke. The sharp turn of his head ruined the knot-in-process, causing his valet to find another unwrinkled cravat and begin again. "Her nerves are quite overset by this whole tragedy, and as she was not at the river, I'm sure she can have nothing of import to add."

Pevensey's lips twisted into a wry smile. "I'm sure your grace knows best." His tone suggested the exact opposite of his meaning. "I'll continue my investigation in other quarters and postpone my interview with Lady Helena until absolutely necessary."

Before the duke could protest again, the butler entered the room. "Sir Victor Worlington is here to see you, my lord. I've shown him into the billiards room."

“Very good,” said the duke, having completed his toilette. “Are we finished then, Mr. Pevensey?”

“Of course,” said Pevensey, “don’t let me keep you from your guest.”

Giving a curt nod, the duke left the room ahead of him while the butler waited to show him out. Pevensey wrinkled his nose as he descended the staircase of the townhouse. Victor Worlington must be some sort of relation to the Lady Worlington who was the deceased’s sister. What bearing that might have on the case he did not know, but he filed it away in his head for future reference. Now, if only Cecil had some news for him….

O

GEOffREY EXHALED WITH annoyance as he entered the corridor. What blasted luck that the fellow who had been investigating the dueling was the same one to investigate Will’s drowning! He must certainly *not* be allowed to interview Helena. But now was not the time to stew on such matters. Deliberately, he unbent the worry lines in his forehead as he stepped into the billiards room. “Sir Victor! Good of you to come.”

Sir Victor had already helped himself to a glass of brandy from the decanter and offered another glass to his host. Geoffrey again found himself drinking much earlier in the day than was his wont. What was it that he had promised Maud on Christmas evening? That alcohol would not touch his lips again? And she, with much more foresight, had urged him not to promise anything so daft. Spirits promised to be his best friend if he were to get what he needed out of Victor Worlington.

“Quite a snug little attic you have here,” said his round-faced guest, glancing up at the high ceilings of the billiard room.

“It suits,” said Geoffrey with a shrug. “Next time you’re in town, you can save some blunt and stay here rather than Maurice’s.” The prospect of playing host to this viper was altogether repulsive, but Geoffrey was keenly aware that there would be no next time. No, in the subsequent few days, all the cards would be on the table, and one of them would win and the other lose.

They played two games of billiards, in between full glasses of brandy. Geoffrey could not help but notice that, despite imbibing freely, Sir Victor had a keen eye and a steady hand—the attributes of

a fine marksman. He had thought to let his guest win to put him in an even better mood, but there was no “letting” about it. The former redcoat won both games of billiards squarely on his own merits, and Geoffrey was forced to paper over his own irritation at being bested.

“My lord, this just arrived,” said a footman, handing the duke a sealed letter. Geoffrey flicked it open with his thumb and scanned the contents quickly. “Deuce take it!” he said, with an irreverent eye roll.

“Why? What is it?” demanded Victor, licking his lips.

“Aldines are having the funeral for Will tomorrow. I shall have to escort Helena and spend a whole afternoon looking grim.”

“Ugh,” grunted Victor. “I probably have a card of my own at the hotel. Stop by for me on your way—I’ll make it a little more palatable for you.”

Geoffrey smiled thinly. He was certain that Maud would have never have penned such an invitation to her stepson—for the letter, he was almost certain, was in his beloved’s hand. And he was equally certain that by bringing Victor Worlington into her family home he would be committing a betrayal of her confidence from which he would be hard put to recover.

“Very well—we’ll stop by for you on the way,” he said. “Wear some crepe if you have it, and we’ll try to hide our smiles together.” He clapped Sir Victor on the back and downed the contents of his glass. A sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. This plan was the very devil. But it was also the only way.

CHAPTER 22

After an unproductive conversation with William Aldine's valet and a flat and uninteresting interview with William Aldine's mother, Pevensey conducted cursory meetings with the rest of the staff. The housemaids, as usual, were quite inventive with their theories about what had happened. Two of them mentioned that they had seen a tall man watching the house off and on over the last week. "An' he looked the very image of the Grim Reaper, he did!" said the frizzy-haired scullery maid. "Aye, an' he must've set a mark on Mr. Aldine," agreed her neater-coifed friend, "for how else can you explain it that he were the only one t'die in the spill." The butler, a prestigious-looking individual named Fullerton, took a dim view of such superstitious stories, offering his apologies to Pevensey for his subordinates.

"Thank you. I will sort the wheat from the chaff later," said Pevensey. But, just in case the superstitions had a grain of truth in them, he had included a shadowy figure in his sketchbook, lurking beneath the windows of the Aldine mansion in Grosvenor Square.

At length, Pevensey returned to his flat. He found Edward Cecil there waiting for him—or what he conjectured to be Edward Cecil, for the fellow was much dirtier and ranker smelling than when Pevensey had sent him down to the docks the day before.

"Did you spend the night down on the Thames?" asked Pevensey after they had shaken hands in greeting.

"Much of it," said Cecil, "and then I went back this morning to follow a lead I'd gained."

"Well then," said Pevensey, handing his friend a cloth to wipe the dirt off his face, "I am all attention."

"The main man down at the docks is Richard Pike—a strong, big-shouldered fellow, with a great black beard. He holds no official position, but from what I could tell, he ensures that the wherrymen all charge a similar fee and that custom is shared out equally enough for all to earn their bread."

"I've heard of him. Did you meet this Mr. Pike in person?"

“Briefly. And I’m sad to say that he had no news of the young cousin I was searching for.”

“Young cousin?”

“Why, yes!” said Cecil with a grin. “My poor lost cousin Jack Powell, come up from Sussex to London to make his fortune.”

“Ah!” replied Pevensey. “So that was your story, was it?”

“Indeed, and a helpful one too, for no sooner do you talk about a missing lad then tongues start to wag about another lad that’s gone missing. The helmsman whose wherry sank has not surfaced yet. But the family’s not in mourning, so they must know *something* about his whereabouts.

“The family?”

“Oh, I’ve gotten ahead of myself. The lad piloting the scuttled wherry was none other than Dickie Pike, son of the head man. Now, if the lad *were* dead, I doubt Mr. Pike would be the kind to wail and rend his clothes, but would he carry on as if all were normal? He must have some assurance of the lad’s safety.”

“Were the other wherry men remarking on it?”

“Not in his presence, of course. The fellow I talked to this morning seemed to think that Dickie was alive but had gone to ground temporarily.”

“Because of the death?”

“Just so. If a titled gent dies, there’s likely hell to pay. He was surprised that no one from Bow Street had raised a breeze yet looking for him.”

“Well, let him stay surprised a little longer. No need to bring in a Runner when a gentleman from Sussex can do such good work.” Pevensey grinned. “If the game’s still good and they haven’t twigged, could you go down to the docks again and ferret out Dickie Pike’s whereabouts? Or even the lodgings of the Richard Pike family—for they might be one and the same?”

“I can certainly attempt that tomorrow,” said Cecil. “A man can do anything once he’s eaten—which I haven’t. Come to the house and share a late breakfast with me.”

Pevensey hesitated.

“We’ve taken a small townhouse just for the Christmas season,” said Cecil. “It’s not far from here.”

“I fear I should be out of place.”

Cecil grinned, his black curls escaping from the woolen hat that Pevensey had lent him. “No more so than I,” he said, gesturing at his

grimy clothes. “In fact, I think it may have to be *you* explaining *my* presence to Edwina, and not the other way around.”

O

IN HIS POSITION as a Bow Street Runner attached to the offices of the London magistrates, Jacob Pevensey had conversed with footmen and farriers, dukes and doctors, courtesans and cabinet members. But in all his wide experience, he had never been more anxious than for his upcoming visit to a rented house on Baker Street.

A footman opened the door, but Miss Cecil was not far behind in the entrance hall. “Goodness, Edward! You look a sight!” she said, followed by, “Hello, Mr. Pevensey. How delightful to see you again. Won’t you come in to the parlor?”

Pevensey executed a quick bow, his anxiety beginning to evaporate. His friend’s sister was as charming as ever, her black curls pulled back in a simple chignon. Her manner was as if he were an old family friend or near neighbor who had just called on them last week. He managed a half smile but saw that her attention was distracted by her brother.

“Dining room, rather!” Cecil was saying, assiduously trying to buss his sister’s cheek as she equally assiduously tried to avoid his smelly embrace. “I’m famished and I’m sure Pevensey is as well.”

“The breakfast has been cleared,” said Miss Cecil with a look at the clock in the hallway, “but I can ask Cook to make it again. There should be time while you head upstairs to *wash*.”

“Very well,” said Cecil with a groan. He rubbed his belly to alleviate—or accentuate—his hunger pangs. He disappeared up the staircase to search out some soap and water.

“It was kind of you to involve Edward in your investigation.” She was looking at *him* now.

“Oh, not at all,” Pevensey said lamely. He cudgeled his brain for some other rejoinder as she led the way to the parlor. “And how are you enjoying town?”

“Oh, it was quite amusing until the recent unpleasantness,” said Miss Cecil.

Pevensey immediately felt the fool for his question. It was her best friend’s fiancé who had perished—of course, she would be affected! “I beg your pardon,” he said, standing stiffly as she took a seat. “I am so used to death in the course of my work that I sometimes forget how it

can affect others who are connected more closely to the matter."

"Oh, please do not trouble yourself on my account." She took her embroidery out of a little basket by the settee and gestured for him to take a seat. "I barely knew Mr. Aldine—although I do feel quite deeply for poor Helena." Her blue eyes were pools of compassion. "I was with her all day yesterday, and I plan to call on her again this afternoon."

It was a timely announcement, considering that Lord Tilbury had just shown Pevensey the door. Pevensey had forgotten how useful Miss Cecil had proved on the case in Sussex. "You are fortunate. Lady Helena's brother refuses to allow me to interview her."

Her needle dipped in and out of her embroidery work. "That sounds like Geoffrey. Do you have something you need me to ask her?"

Pevensey both appreciated how quick her mind was and deplored how familiar she seemed to be with Lord Tilbury. It was another reason to dislike the long-legged peer who was thwarting his investigation. Without mincing words, he explained the mysterious half-healed wound on Will Aldine's shoulder.

"You have a suspicion already, it seems, as to its origin."

Pevensey shook his head. "My only suspicion is that it might be a dueling wound."

"But surely pistols are more common than swords for a duel?"

"Certainly, but duels with a blade still do occur. Rumor has it that Lord Tilbury was engaged in a duel a fortnight ago. He is reputed to be an excellent swordsman—he would favor the blade if he called someone out."

"Geoffrey and Will?" She paused in her needlework. "Whatever would be the purpose of that?"

"Lord Tilbury admits that he did not like Mr. Aldine, and I happen to know that Mr. Aldine was…" He hesitated, unsure how much information to impart to an unmarried young lady of fashion.

"Disreputable?" Miss Cecil suggested.

"Yes, indeed," said Pevensey, breathing a sigh of relief. Genteel young ladies normally did not discuss kept women, but then genteel young ladies also went into hysterics when the bodies of murder victims were described. "There's an actress at the King's Theatre—"

He paused again, as Miss Cecil's face became suffused in what could only be described as anger.

"At the King's Theatre?" She jabbed her needle into the fabric with unnecessary force. "The scoundrel! We attended a play there in his

company—how perfectly vile to take in the charms of one's mistress while murmuring sweet nothings to one's betrothed! I never liked him you know—but the first time I met him was at the betrothal ball, and the matter was already settled—it was too late to say anything."

The heat in her normally fair skin was attractive, and a few tendrils of black hair had escaped from the chignon at the nape of her neck to curl around her flushed face. Pevensey wished that he could take out his sketchbook then and there and capture the vision of loveliness before him.

She took a deep breath, trying to restore calm to her spirit. "So then, you think that Geoffrey discovered his lechery and called him out? A rebuke for consorting with courtesans while courting an honorable bride?"

"It is a possibility," said Pevensey. "Although Lord Tilbury will hardly say as much to me. Clearly, Aldine did not leave off this 'consorting' after the duel, which leads me to wonder if Lord Tilbury found it necessary to employ harsher measures."

Miss Cecil stared, her pretty lips parting in distress.

Pevensey realized that he had, albeit indirectly, just accused her friend's brother of murder. "Once again, I must beg your pardon. These people are your companions, your circle of friends." He looked down deprecatingly. "I should keep my suspicions to myself."

"No," she said, rising to her feet while Pevensey followed suit. "You need not hide your suspicions from me. I want to help. The valet will know about the wound. Have you interviewed him?"

"The valet refuses to talk as well. If there was a duel, perhaps he acted as his master's second and is afraid of admitting as much and implicating himself in the affair." While a peer would have no trouble getting acquitted by the House of Lords for illegal dueling, a lowly valet was in a more precarious position.

"And the…actress? She might be acquainted with the reasons for the duel and the identity of the man Will fought?"

Pevensey clapped his hands together and leaned in closer. "You are brilliant, Miss Cecil. I inquired if she knew about any enemies, but I did not specifically broach the matter of a duel. I shall revisit the subject with her."

"And I shall explore the matter—discreetly—with Helena. I do not think she would withhold the story from me if she had heard it, but I also doubt that she knows anything untoward about her intended. The way she describes him—as if he were some sort of demigod." She

looked at him, her own eyes shimmering with apology. “I’m afraid I haven’t the heart to tarnish that memory.”

“A sentiment worthy of you,” said Pevensey. It was a sincere compliment, a kind that rarely passed his lips.

A pink flush came back into Miss Cecil’s cheeks, and she looked down at the floral carpet.

The moment was curtailed by Cecil poking his head in the door. “There you are!” He was now suitably attired in a dark jacket and waistcoat with the sheen of cleanliness over his clear face. “Cook is ready, and unless you mean for me to eat sausage on the sofa, I suggest that we all remove to the dining room.”

O

AFTER THE DETAILS of the funeral had been arranged and his father’s still bedside visited once more, Ralph Aldine put on his beaver, muffler, and coat and stepped out into the cold. He shivered. The family often sent out the carriage to take him to his lodgings, and indeed, he could have ordered it himself without any imposition, but today he needed the bracing chill of the winter air. Before he left the house, Dr. Bowles had returned. Ralph had engaged him in conversation out of the earshot of Maud or Juliana and demanded a prognosis. Speaking candidly, the physician had little hope that the viscount would ever recover consciousness.

A gust of cold wind clawed at him with icy fingers, and Ralph pulled his muffler tighter around his face. The women had not given up hope yet and certainly had not had time to turn their thoughts to financial matters. But as a solicitor, thinking about such things was as involuntary as blinking. Within the next few days, Viscount Aldine would give up the ghost without a legitimate male heir to succeed him. The estate was entailed to the nearest male relative, which meant that Stapleton Aldine would soon be preening like a peacock in the house on Grosvenor Square. With Maud’s own jointure pocketed by that devil from Devon, both she and her mother would be forced to live on the small pittance Juliana could draw from her own settlement —unless cousin Stapleton undertook to provide for his newly impoverished kin.

Ralph hastened his step to keep the blood flowing in his freezing limbs. He would offer, of course, to support them as he could, but on a solicitor’s income his lodgings were sparsely furnished and cramped to

boot. A hired woman came in for a couple hours each day to clean the rooms and make his dinner, but that was a far cry from the dozens of servants Lady Aldine and Lady Worlington were used to.

And this, all this, was nothing to the position that Lady Helena must find herself in. Ralph forced himself to put her sweet face out of mind. Her sorrow and her situation must be her brother's responsibility. And yet, Lord Tilbury, in a grand chivalric gesture, had offered his aid in the troubles besetting Maud. Might not *he* do the same for Lady Helena?

Ralph balled his stinging fingers into fists and rubbed his thumb across the back of them. Nay, chivalry was a luxury best left to lords and ladies of leisure. A bastard solicitor who must earn his bread had no grand gestures to offer—just a cold, dark house to come home to and a dream that was better left unsaid.

The Ninth Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 23

When Geoffrey gave the coachman orders to stop by Maurice's on their way to the Aldines', he could see the confusion writ large on Helena's face.

"I offered a ride to one of Lady Worlington's relatives," he explained.

"Why ever would you do that?" asked Helena, already a puddle of tears before they had set on their way. "You know I cannot hold a conversation with anyone at present."

"Then keep quiet," said Geoffrey firmly. He was unable and unwilling to explain the reason for the unexpected guest, and his own anxiety bubbled over into irritation.

The stricken look on Helena's face showed that she considered herself ill-used in the utmost. She placed her black veil over her face, retreated into herself, and refused to say another word. When Sir Victor climbed into the seat opposite and inclined his head in greeting, she made no motion of acknowledgment.

Geoffrey blessed his good fortune that his sister knew nothing of the tangled coil that bound Maud to her stepson. Then, choking down his guilt over what had already transpired and what was to come, he spent his effort on exchanging pleasantries with Sir Victor. The eagerness on the man's round face was palpable—Geoffrey could sense that if he had not invited him along, Sir Victor would have found his own way into the Aldines' house.

When their wheels rolled to a stop, Geoffrey saw that the funeral coach was already in place in front of the house—a black carriage pulled by four black horses, their heads bedecked with dark ostrich feathers. After the body had been seen and condolences had been said, Will's coffin would depart in this carriage, leading a processional of mourners to the churchyard where he would rest forever.

They disembarked from the carriage, Geoffrey exiting first and offering Helena his assistance. Then came the third member of their party. Geoffrey watched in disgust as Sir Victor licked his lips. His

round face was like a rotten apple, the gaping worm-holes pointed in the direction of Lady Worlington's door. How could he inflict this fellow on her, and especially at such a time as this?

"Are you too tired to continue?" Geoffrey asked his sister, hoping that she would provide the necessary excuse to leave Lady Worlington her peace.

"No," said Helena faintly from behind her black lace. "I want to be here. I need to be here."

Geoffrey straightened his back. He needed to be here as well. It had been three days since Montesquerrat's ill-fated card party, and Geoffrey's broken promise to visit Lady Worlington the next day still cut like a piece of broken glass. He cast a sidelong glance at Sir Victor, forcing himself to maintain the poise of an experienced swordsman. He was certain that the next few hours would be his own private hell as he played the part that fate had assigned him.

As they entered the house, they saw that the guests were proceeding through a receiving line, offering their condolences to the bereaved mother and sister. Geoffrey put a hand under Helena's elbow and propelled her ahead of him—then hung back as his sister took Maud's hand and embraced Lady Aldine in silence.

Victor was at his own elbow, breathing, watching, infecting the whole house with his poison.

Geoffrey saw Lady Worlington's eyes catch hold of him. Her weary face filled with light, almost as if a sunbeam had split the winter clouds to shine through the windows full on her face. Perhaps his absence had been put to good effect, for the eyes fixed on him bore a far fonder expression than he had ever seen before. He knew in that instant that whatever scruples Maud had formerly held concerning his character, his commitment, or his younger years were gone. Her lips parted slightly, and his memory carried him back with astonishing force to that brief moment beneath the mistletoe when she had received and responded to his kiss.

"Good afternoon, Lord Tilbury," she said, ignoring or else unaware of the menacing figure that stood just behind his shoulder. "It is good of you to come." She extended her hand.

He could not bear to give her the cut direct, but cut her he must if he were to maintain Sir Victor's trust.

"Oh rather." He avoided her eye, staring off into the space above her head. "I always avoid a funeral if I can, but Helena insisted." Her hand was raised, but he did not take it. He could not risk it now, when

the touch of her skin would set all his senses afire and consume all the preparations he was so carefully laying.

Her hand fell to her side, white and forlorn against the black bombazine that made up her dress. “I see,” she said simply, the ray of light leaving her face. He knew she could sense the difference immediately, the shield of consideration that he had withdrawn from her, leaving her to stand on her own against the slings and arrows of what might come.

She would not flinch now, not in front of the world, but Geoffrey could sense that his coldness had pierced her down to the very center of her being.

He murmured an expression of condolence to Lady Aldine and then turned his back on the women, matching his stride with Victor’s and meandering into the adjoining room where Will’s body was on display.

O

MAUD MOVED LIKE an automaton. Her eyes were dry, and her hopes as well—she did not think they would ever feel the sweet grace of rain again. Lord Tilbury had come at last, but in company with Victor and with the voice of a stranger. By a sheer act of will, she forced her lips to keep murmuring greetings to the entering guests. Lady Aldine’s own stamina was flagging—Maud must continue to be her support.

But despite all her concentration, her mind kept walking around the corners of her eyes. There *he* was now, entering the parlor, talking and laughing with her stepson as if this were simply another social event in the Christmas season, as if Victor and he were old friends with a wealth of shared memories.

She made eye contact with Lord and Lady Fremont, allowing her former friend Emma to press her hand. She had been longing for Geoffrey’s presence for two interminable days, and now he avoided her as if she had the plague. What poison had Victor dropped in his ear?

Shame suffused her face. The letter. What else could it be? That foolish letter that had haunted her ever since the ink had dried on the paper. Had Victor shown it to Geoffrey or only described its contents? Whatever the case, it was clear that Lord Tilbury wanted nothing more to do with her. What must he think of her? What must he think!

“I am so sorry, my dear,” said Lady Fremont, attributing Maud’s

heartache to distress over Will. The large woman enveloped Maud in her arms. “My husband thought I was too far increased to come to the viewing, but I insisted.” She pulled a handkerchief from her bosom and handed it to Maud. Murmuring thanks, Maud politely dabbed at her eyes which refused to lament and turned to the next visitor for another round of condolences.

After fifty or so guests had entered the house and proceeded to the parlor to pay their respects, the stream of visitors trickled down to a halt. Maud turned to her mother. “Can you bear anymore of this?”

Lady Aldine sighed. Maud noticed, for the first time, that her hair had streaks of gray around the temples. “I rather think I cannot. But can you, my dear? I should not like to leave you alone if I retire upstairs to sit with your father.”

“Ralph is here,” said Maud, expressing more confidence than she felt. “He will see me through.”

“Are you sure?” said Lady Aldine hesitantly, but in the end, she let herself be persuaded to ascend the staircase while Maud went to join their guests.

The atmosphere of the parlor was hushed and somber. Will had been laid out in a blue tailored suit, and although his skin was still white as a lily, the undertaker had done his work to make the features less frightful in their final repose. Standing by the open coffin, Fullerton held out a basket of dried lavender bouquets, each painstakingly secured with a bow of black ribbon. Maud had kept vigil by Will’s corpse last night, and the lavender was the fruit of her midnight labors.

The parlor led into the dining room where a collation of cold meats and cheeses had been set out on the table. There the guests talked in hushed tones, filling the silence with platitudes, speculations, or else frivolous nothings that were jarringly out of place.

Maud hung back a little at the entrance to the dining room, screened by the large fronds of a potted plant. Since when had she ever feared to enter a room in her own parents’ house? But then, she had no desire to run into Lord Tilbury again or to face Sir Victor who had doubtless come to gloat.

In the buzz of people in front of her, a gay voice rang out. “Wipe those crocodile tears, Lord Fremont. One would almost think you were sad about this funeral. I hear tell you are more than a little pleased at the parting gift Will Aldine left you at the King’s Theatre.”

Maud recognized the shrewish voice of Emma’s younger sister

Anthea Wedgwood, another guest she could not remember having invited. A parting gift from Will? What on earth could she be referring to?

"Now, now," said Lord Fremont, Anthea's brother-in-law, in a much softer tone, "that's not a story to come to your sister's ears." He looked guiltily over to the window where the stout Lady Fremont was in discourse with Lady Cowper. I suppose you're glad enough *yourself* of the matter—now that Lady Helena's betrothal is off, Lord Tilbury won't be thrown in the way of that Worlington widow so much."

"Indeed," said Miss Wedgwood with a mean-spirited laugh. "One does wish those widows on the catch would leave the younger bachelors for us fair maidens. Why, it hasn't even been a twelvemonth since her own husband passed!"

Maud felt anger coursing through her veins. So, this was what people said of her behind her back. And once Victor spread his stories beyond Lord Tilbury, they would soon say worse. And if she refused to face them? The poison would only spread all the faster. No, she must brazen it out. Maud took a deep breath, lifted her chin high, and entered the room, walking past a flustered Lord Fremont and a supercilious Miss Wedgwood and leaving them to wonder whether she had in fact overheard their exchange.

She spotted Helena in the corner and was heading in her direction when a heavy breathing near her ear caused her to pause.

"Ah, my dear cousin," said Stapleton. "My deepest condolences on this most distressing matter. There would have been two of us here to offer them, but Eustace is feeling quite low since Will's passing. They were great friends, those two. Indubitably, the greatest of friends."

Maud could not recall much love lost between Will and Eustace—rather, Will had been quite cruel to the boy whenever they were together. But then, perhaps, Eustace had not seen it that way. The ways of the rougher sex were mysterious to Maud.

"Thank you, cousin." She mustered all the cordiality she could.

"I took the liberty of calling on Dr. Bowles on my way here," said Stapleton. He clucked and shook his head. "So sad to hear that he's given up hope. Only a matter of time, he says. But of course, if Will's death teaches us anything, it's that we're all tiptoeing on the brink of eternity."

"Only a matter of time," Maud repeated dully. "Are you speaking of my father?"

"Well, yes, of course," said Stapleton. He rubbed his face with his

thick fingers, whose rings were curiously absent. “Did he not tell you that he no longer holds out any hope?”

“He omitted to say as much at his last visit,” said Maud shortly.

“I beseech you not to worry about the imminent future,” said Stapleton. His words were even more unctuous than usual, and Maud could see the self-satisfied smirk of a cat beneath his caring expression. “You and Lady Aldine will be welcome with me for as long as you need before setting up your own establishment.”

Maud’s jaw dropped, and it took her a whole second to recover. Their own establishment? But of course! With the estate entailed, her father’s death would pass both the town house and the country estate into the hands of Stapleton Aldine, the closest male heir. The thought of living under the same roof as Stapleton made her teeth clench. “Very kind of you, I’m sure,” she said, choking down the urge to scream. Stapleton continued to talk, but her mind could comprehend nothing more of what he said. Her eyes drifted to the margin where Helena stood like a veiled specter. Near Helena stood Sir Victor, holding a small plate and chewing on the leg of a Cornish hen with his eyes fixed on her.

And then, like a beacon in a storm, she saw Ralph by the far door of the dining room that led out into the corridor. He had just turned his shoulders and was exiting the room. “Pardon me,” she said to Stapleton, despite the fact that he was mid-sentence, and placing a hand to her aching head, she navigated through the sea of false sympathy until she came to the door herself. Ralph was twenty feet away and disappearing into the seclusion of the library. Apparently, he also could endure it no longer—the simpering faces pretending pity for their loss, their mouths chewing bread in the Aldine house even while they masticated her own reputation behind a screen of fans.

Maud massaged her temples fiercely, the headache from her lack of sleep growing into a sharper pain. Her lungs began to close in on themselves. She darted down the corridor after her brother, flinging open the library door with a pant. “Ralph, I can’t breathe! How can you stand it?”

She froze. In front of the hearth stood Geoffrey Angiers, his arm leaning on the mantelpiece while the firelight played through his golden hair. Ralph stood opposite him, and they were deep in conversation.

They paused, both sets of eyes staring across the room at her, surprise written all over their faces. “I beg your pardon,” said Maud

stiffly. “I did not realize that this room was occupied.” Turning quickly in her black kid slippers, she abandoned the room and glided to the staircase.

The butler was standing there with the nearly empty lavender basket, ready to receive any latecomers. “Fullerton,” said Maud, feeling tears start to well in the corners of her eyes. “Please make sure that our guests have everything they need. Mr. Whittle will be here shortly to see about loading the coffin.”

“Of course, my lady,” said the butler, and Maud could sense an added gentleness in his perpetually proper voice.

She disappeared up the stairs to take refuge under the bedclothes, the last comfort afforded her—at least until the entail forced her pilgrimage into the humiliating circumstances of genteel poverty.

CHAPTER 24

Pevensey knocked on the door of the Baker Street house. Cecil had sent a note asking him to come round. The gray Monday afternoon was already fading swiftly into a dreary Monday evening. Pevensey had uncovered a clue too perplexing to keep to himself, so Cecil's note had been a surprise as sweet as a cup of chocolate.

Once inside the house, Pevensey noted that Cecil's face was looking freshly scrubbed again.

"You'll never guess where I ate my supper today," said Cecil smugly.

"On the docks, by the look of you," said Pevensey. "Your bath has taken the smell away, but you missed a smudge behind your ear." He took a seat on the same sofa where Miss Cecil was sitting, careful to keep to his own corner of it.

"Very near there," replied Cecil, scratching furiously at his black sideburns and behind them. He sank into a chair. "In Richard Pike's house. By casting out a careful net, I discovered what church his wife attends and contrived to run across her there yesterday. When she heard the tale of my poor lost cousin, she took pity on me and invited me over for an early supper today at their table."

"And how did Mr. Pike enjoy your presence?"

"Why, he was none too pleased at first, but when his goodwife informed him that they had been strangers too in the land of Egypt, he put a brave face on it and gave me the best piece of fish. The evening hours are prime business for the wherries, with all the fashionable folk crossing the Thames, so they eat early and then out he goes again to ply his trade with his older children."

"And were the Pike children present?"

"Aye—Isaiah, Mary, Deborah, Thomas, Silas, and Johnny."

"But not young Dickie?" asked Miss Cecil, embroidering once again as was her wont.

"Nay,"—Cecil's smile grew broader—"but I did catch sight of Mrs. Pike preparing an extra plate and ordering Mary to take it out to the

shed."

Cecil looked at Pevensey meaningfully. "Say no more," said Pevensey. "If we provide Sir Richard with the address tomorrow, the Horse Patrol should be able to surround the spot before anyone is the wiser and bring Dickie Pike in for questioning. You've done well, Cecil. Very well!"

"You look as if you may have done the same," said Miss Cecil. She gave Pevensey a thoughtful stare before looking back down at her needle.

"I took your advice and revisited the actress," said Pevensey, his freckled face breaking into a faint smile. "You were right. Aldine had told her about the duel—who it was with and what it was for."

Miss Cecil's lips pressed together in a concerned line as if she were suppressing her thoughts.

"Well! Out with it, man!" said Cecil, his black curls bouncing excitedly.

Pevensey hesitated. "My suspicions were confirmed. Lord Tilbury inflicted that wound. He called out Will Aldine nearly a fortnight ago and insisted that he marry his sister. Aldine refused until forced to sign the betrothal documents at sword's point."

"Hmm…," pondered Cecil. "I'd heard a rumor that Tilbury might have been involved in a duel recently. There must have been enough flirtation between the two that Tilbury considered his sister's reputation compromised."

"She is with child," Miss Cecil blurted out.

Cecil's eyes grew as big as acorns. "What's this, Edwina?"

Pevensey folded his arms. He had suspected as much but would never have hazarded such a guess about Miss Cecil's friend.

"She confessed it to me yesterday." Miss Cecil's pretty mouth twisted with discomfort. "I've been pummeling my conscience whether 'twould be more right to tell you or keep her confidence." She breathed deeply and looked up into Pevensey's gray eyes. "But I think you already knew—or guessed."

Pevensey nodded. His eyes were gentle.

"I do not think she knows about the duel," said Miss Cecil quietly. "She believes that Will meant to marry her all along."

"So—what does this mean, Pevensey?" Cecil bounded up from his seat. "Surely Tilbury is not a suspect in the wherry accident? After all, he needed Helena taken care of. He needed Will alive!"

"I don't know," said Pevensey slowly. He was not used to stating

his thoughts aloud before they were fully formed. “Perhaps he learned something new that night—maybe that Aldine meant to break off the betrothal? The actress says Tilbury threatened to kill Aldine if he didn’t marry his sister. Perhaps Aldine tried to cry off and Tilbury proved as good as his word.”

“Father in heaven,” said Miss Cecil quietly, and Pevensey saw that her eyes were closed. She was praying, but only her lips were moving. Pevensey looked away, uncomfortable. Normally, he would be elated that the clues were falling into place. But today he could only pity Miss Cecil’s distress. If her friend’s brother turned out to be the murderer of her friend’s betrothed, there would be nobody to take care of Lady Helena in her time of need.

“What do we do now?” demanded Cecil.

“Do?” Pevensey rose to his feet. “Bring in Dickie Pike. I wager he knows why that boat went down, and once he talks, we’ll know whether Tilbury’s anger got the better of him or whether it truly was an accident.”

O

MAUD WAITED IN her room until she saw the last funeral guest depart the house and the funeral procession, with its brightly glowing lanterns, roll away through the dark London streets. Ralph would be gone as well, fulfilling the position of chief mourner at the grave site. She rang for Perkins to ensure that there would be no more unpleasant surprises awaiting her in the dining room or library.

“Everyone’s gone, my lady,” the girl confirmed, bobbing a curtsy. She went over to the window and looked outside. “An’ I don’t even see Jeremiah Bradstreet on the corner, so mayhap the devil’s done spying on you, your ladyship.”

“Thank you,” said Maud with a sigh, finally ready to descend the stairs again. Inside the dining room, she passed through the door where she had overheard the odious Anthea Wegwood conversing with Lord Freeman. She looked over to the corner where Sir Victor had been leering at her, licking his lips as he tore apart the leg of a game hen. How many days till Epiphany? She held out three fingers against the smooth blackness of her skirt. She had three days left to make her decision, to choose Purgatory in Devon or disgrace in London. Although if Stapleton was right, her father’s death would mean a departure from London society anyway. She had no money to

maintain herself, and she could only survive off her mother's or Ralph's small incomes if she remained in town.

She looked over the long cherry wood table and walked to the head of it. Lifting her black skirts, she sat down in the chair. In the center of the epergne was the pineapple that Geoffrey Angiers had sent over a week ago.

Fullerton came in carrying a tray, no doubt confused why she would be dining there in the vast loneliness rather than in the comfort of her own chambers. "A little ham, my lady?"

"Yes," said Maud. It was the first meal she had eaten all day. "And the pineapple—I want you to cut it open."

"Of course," said the butler in muted tones. He sent one of the footmen off to the kitchen for the proper carving knife. Then, holding the pineapple gingerly with one hand, he used the newly procured blade to slice through the textured skin of the fruit. The spiky-leaved crown fell off ingloriously and the body of the fruit separated into halves.

"I'm afraid the fruit is overripe, my lady," said the butler, his forehead crinkling in dismay. The soft yellow flesh had darkened in spots where the rot was beginning to settle in.

Maud took a look at it and could not help but concur. She had waited too long—both with the pineapple and with Geoffrey Angiers himself. And now the sweetness had cloyed and the promises were expired.

"No matter," said Maud dully. "I think I've lost my appetite." She stood up from the table, leaving the concerned butler staring at her back, and went down the corridor to the library that must now, assuredly, be empty.

Her eyes ran over the familiar spines that lined the shelves, but her head ached too much to think of reading. She walked over to the wingback chair, her favorite place to sit while reading to her father. A volume of verse lay open on the seat. She picked it up and her eyes fell on the page facing her.

> Where shall the lover rest,
> Whom the fates sever
> From his true maiden's breast,
> Parted for ever?
> Where, through groves deep and high,
> Sounds the far billow,

Where early violets die,
 Under the willow.
Soft shall be his pillow.

Who had been reading Sir Walter Scott? Ralph and she had similar temperaments, but that did not extend to poetry. But why think of Ralph when the answer of course was obvious. She knew who had been in their library earlier that evening—but she refused to admit it even to herself.

Her eyes drifted further down the page:

Where shall the traitor rest,
 He, the deceiver,
Who could win maiden's breast,
 Ruin, and leave her?
In the lost battle,
 Borne down by the flying,
Where mingles war's rattle
 With groans of the dying;
 There shall he be lying.

Her wing shall the eagle flap
 O'er the falsehearted;
His warm blood the wolf shall lap
 Ere life be parted:
Shame and dishonour sit
 By his grave ever;
Blessing shall hallow it
 Never, O never!
 Never, O never!

She shut the book with a mighty clap. Traitor! Deceiver! Was he calling himself thus? Or was it by pure chance that the book lay open to this page? Maud sighed. This much she knew was true: Lord Tilbury was lost to her and little else was left.

O

GEOFFREY PACED HIS room. It had taken a full five hours and half a bottle of brandy before he could send Victor on his way. The man was enamored with him now, or at least enamored with the fictional side

of the duke that Geoffrey was allowing him to see.

That was not to say that he needn't still exercise caution.

"Where did you disappear to at the reception?" Victor had demanded after Helena had left the two of them abruptly and retired to her room.

The closer he could get to the truth, the less likely he was to be discovered. "That Aldine solicitor called me into the library to settle some business." Geoffrey handed Victor another full glass. "I'd already paid an installment of Helena's dowry." He laughed. "As you can imagine, I wanted the funds returned to me."

Victor guffawed at this and let the matter drop. The talk turned then to women, and Geoffrey discovered that to keep his new friend's respect he had to invent some liaisons of a disreputable nature. Sir Victor's appetite for such scurrilous stories was unparalleled, and Geoffrey felt his insides churning within him at the thought of Maud ever returning to her stepson's house in Devon.

When the time was right, Geoffrey dropped a casual remark into the conversation. "I thought we might host a card game with a few friends tomorrow night."

"What? Here?" asked Sir Victor, sizing up the elegant card table in the billiards room.

Geoffrey followed his gaze. "Unfortunately, no. My sister is already cross enough at me for keeping company with you so soon after her bereavement. If I plan a soirée, who knows what vapors she'd subject me to?" He glanced at Victor thoughtfully. "You have a suite of rooms at your hotel?"

"Yes," the thickset man grunted, "but nothing so grand as what you have here. One table is all there'd be room for. There's a hell down the street from Maurice's that—"

"One table is all we need to enjoy ourselves," said Geoffrey smoothly. "I have a friend, the Marquis de Montesquerrat, who enjoys a gamble and a glass of the finest. But he is very fastidious. A hell is not at all to his taste. He makes three, and then for a fourth, perhaps the tall officer I met the other day…?"

"Captain Andrews," said Victor decidedly. "Aye, he may be up for some diversion."

"Good, good," said Geoffrey. "I'm sure your suite will do nicely." He sized up Sir Victor's foxed face and identified the root of any remaining reluctance. "I'll have my valet bring over a case of liquor in the afternoon in case your stores are running low."

“Ah, capital!” said Sir Victor, his objections dissipating as thoroughly as his sobriety. Geoffrey had begun to realize by now that the fellow liked battening off his friends and rarely had to pay for his own drink. In more ways than one, he was a vampire, looking for others’ blood to suck until their veins ran dry.

Midnight had come and gone before Geoffrey could bid his loathsome friend adieu, and now, alone in his chambers at last, he could not sleep. What must Lady Worlington think of him? His behavior to her today had been boorish in the extreme—and clearly, it had distressed her. What had she once said to him? When a lady is crying, it is not always over *you*. But there had been definite tears in Maud Worlington’s eyes when she bolted from the library like a wounded doe. And he did not think he was flattering himself to assume those tears were being shed for him. He had tried to leave her a little note, a cryptic message in the language they both loved. But then, he’d had no pencil to mark the lines of poetry he meant. Would she understand how fully he felt a sense of loss at being parted from her?

Sighing, he sat down at the desk in his room and, seizing an inkwell, proceeded to write a peremptory summons to his friend the marquis. *I shall call for you at nine o’clock in the evening. Come armed for all eventualities. I shall explain more on the way….*

The Tenth Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 25

It was still dark and desperately cold outside when the Horse Patrol surrounded the shabby riverside house where the Pike family lay abed. Jacob Pevensey entered the shed without knocking and found it empty of persons but with a stack of dirty plates sitting on a bench. Clearly, someone *had* taken up residence in the shed, but with the winter temperatures, the anonymous soul might have removed to the house for the nighttime hours. Without batting an eye, Pevensey made for the larger building and rapped smartly on the door.

"Go away!" growled an ornery voice from behind the thin wood.

"Now, see here, Mr. Pike!" said Pevensey. "We know that your son Dickie is in there, and we need him to make a statement down at the magistrates' office. We mean him no harm."

There was talking inside—Pevensey could hear shrill objections from a female voice—and then after a moment of silence, the door creaked open cautiously.

A young fellow with wide eyes and broad shoulders stepped out, hat in hand, followed closely by a great black-bearded river man, who must have been his father. "I'll be going with him," said Richard Pike, "case'n you try to confuse the lad with any flim-flammery."

Twenty minutes later they had passed through the dark streets and were seated in one of the anterooms at Bow Street.

"Now then, Master Pike," said Pevensey, taking a seat opposite the young river man, "I think you know why you are here."

"He don't know nothing," interrupted his father, his teeth set firmly behind the great black beard of his.

Pevensey ignored the older man's reply and removed his notebook from his jacket. "On December the twenty-eighth, you were involved in a boating accident, Master Pike. Is this correct?"

"No!" shouted Richard Pike at the same time as Dickie Pike said, "Aye."

"Sir," said Pevensey, fixing the older man with a firm eye. "I am putting the questions to your son, and I must ask you to keep quiet, or

I will remove you from the room." Pevensey was aware that the contrast between the burly watermen and his own slight physique was laughable, but he was not unused to dealing with this kind of belligerence.

"Now, then," said Pevensey. "How many passengers were on your boat, Master Pike?"

"Three, sir," said the lad, sending an anxious glance toward his father.

"And what were their names?"

"I don't rightly know, sir. They didna say as much when they paid the fare."

"Had you ferried any of these men across the river before?" Pevensey began to sketch the young man. The muscles on his neck twitched frenetically, and his hands hooked themselves into claws around the arms of the chair.

"Earlier in the evening. They came over the Thames 'bout eight o'clock."

"Was business slow that night?" asked Pevensey. "It seems a lucky chance that you were there to take the same customers again."

The young man hesitated. "One of the gents, they asked me to tie up for them and wait."

"Oh?" Pevensey's light red eyebrows lifted. "Which one?"

"Like I said, I didn't know their names. It were the tallest of the bunch."

"You must have asked for some sort of payment, if you were going to give up the rest of your night and the opportunity of earning other fares."

"The man paid him," rumbled Richard Pike.

"How much?" demanded Pevensey

"A shilling," said Dickie.

Pevensey's pencil stopped its scratching. "More than fair for a fare, wouldn't you say?"

"Nothing wrong with 'cepting a little bit o' generosity," interjected the father. He shifted his muscled legs in the chair.

"No indeed," said Pevensey—unless that generosity came with a price. "How long did you wait for the gentlemen to return?"

Dickie shrugged. "A few hours."

"And when they came back?"

"They were pickled as herring, to be sure. I took 'em back across, but we must've sprung a leak. My boat went down into the drink, and

I went a fair ways down the river afore I washed up on shore."

"Why have you been hiding in the shed adjoining your parents' house?"

"When I heard that one of the gents was dead, I was a-feared I would be blamed."

"And should you be?" Pevensey had decided to take a hard line with Dickie. If he could only get him out of the influence of his father's steely eye, he sensed there was more that the boy might say.

"No!"

"None of your passengers took you aside, asked you to make the boat go down on purpose?"

Dickie squirmed. "No, sir."

"Now see here," said Richard Pike, leaning forward. Pevensey looked down and saw that the father's big boot was pressed firmly on top of his son's. "We're not in the business o' making boats go down on purpose. You might say that such a thing is *bad* for business, Mr. Pevensey."

"And a shilling wouldn't pay for the cost of a new wherry."

"No, it wouldna," said Richard Pike firmly. His son stared at the floor.

Pevensey was determined not to let the conversation be manhandled by Pike senior. He rose to his feet briskly and opened the door to an adjoining room. "Mr. Cecil, would you be so good as to come in?"

Cecil entered, his indefatigable curiosity untrammeled by the earliness of the hour. "Good morning!"

At the sight of Cecil's black curls, Richard Pike gave an inarticulate growl and sprang to his feet. "I knew it! A bloody spy!" He turned to his son. "I told her no good would come o' inviting that one t'our home, but your fool of a mother wouldna listen."

Cecil took the vociferous greeting in good part and tipped his hat to the irate waterman. "A pleasure to see you again too, Mr. Pike."

Cecil's genteel smile proved too much for the black bearded man to handle. He lunged at the gentleman and would have blackened his eye had not Pevensey pulled his friend out of the way. Pevensey shouted a command, and two members of the Horse Patrol were with them in seconds, pinioning Richard Pike's arms behind him and removing him, cursing, from the room. "You want us to take the youngster too?" asked another rider from the Horse Patrol, poking his head into the anteroom.

“Not at all,” said Pevensey. “I think we have a few more things to talk about, don’t we, Master Pike?” Pevensey had no intention of releasing Dickie from his hands until he sang like a goldfinch.

Dickie Pike winced under Pevensey’s bright-eyed gaze. “I’ve told ye all I know, sir.”

Pevensey tsked at the lie. “Not at all—you’ve omitted to mention what happened while you were waiting for the men to return.”

“Nothing.”

“A Banbury tale if I’ve ever heard one. Come now, you are a capable boatman. You cut your teeth on the haft of an oar, I’m sure—you would never have put out from the dock without realizing your wherry was shipping buckets of water. And there was nothing in the river you could have run aground on. Come, sir, admit it! You sabotaged that wherry with intention to sink your passengers, and once we prove it, it’ll be the charge of murder for you.”

“Oh, sir!” said Dickie, his eyes dilated with shock. Apparently, Pevensey’s threat had proved sufficient to shatter his resolve. “Please, sir! I never meant—he said it were just a friendly joke.”

“*Who* said?” demanded Pevensey. From the corner of his eye, he saw Cecil take a seat unobtrusively in the corner of the room. His friend knew better than to interrupt the interrogation at such a crucial point, but he also wanted to be near enough to hear the outcome of the questions.

“I don’t know!” The boy was quaking with misery now. “He said he were friends with the men in the boat and wanted to play them a joke for not bringing him along that night.”

“How much did he give you?”

The boy hesitated. “A pony.”

Pevensey gave a whistle of surprise—it wasn’t everyone who had twenty-five quid in their pocket to pass on to a boatman. It was enough to buy more than one wherry, and far too much to spend on an innocent lark. “What did he look like, this gentleman?”

“He was tall, sir. With light colored hair and youngish.”

Pevensey caught Cecil’s eye. The description could almost fit Lord Tilbury.

“Was he one of the gents you ferried over earlier?”

“Naw, someone different, I think. He had a mask over his eyes—those half masks that fancy gents wear to their parties.”

“Might he have been one of the fellows in the boating party with a mask over his face?”

Dickie's chapped lips split in confusion. "Aye, I suppose he might. I had not thought of that."

Patiently, Pevensey had the lad describe every detail he could remember of the mysterious man's features and costume. It was not much. He sketched a shadowy, nondescript figure into his notebook—however, it was readily apparent that had Lord Tilbury donned a cloak and mask and separated himself from his party, he could easily have been the man who approached Dickie with the bribe.

He looked at the lad with pity and disgust. To scuttle a boat at night and with passengers aboard was a dangerous proposition—the gold must have called strongly to him. But who knew where the money was now? In his own pocket or his father's?

Pevensey rose from his chair and offered his hand to the agitated young man. "You've done the right thing to speak the truth. You'll have to swear to as much in a court of law if it should come to a trial, and I can't say as the judge will find you faultless in all this. But seeing as you were led into it by another party, the court may be kind."

Dickie swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing like a glass bottle out at sea. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. May I go home now?"

"Aye, but I may be calling on you soon to help identify the man in the mask who paid the pony."

Summoning another member of the Horse Patrol, Pevensey ushered Dickie out, and the still belligerent Richard Pike was ejected from the building at the same time.

The red-haired detective turned to Cecil with a great sigh. "Well, what think you?" He took the seat opposite his friend.

Cecil grimaced and ran a hand through his black curls. "Damning in the utmost. I wanted Tilbury innocent, but with the duel, his threats, and the description the boatman gives…I cannot help but suspect him. A bold move, though—to pay to scuttle a boat you yourself would be riding in."

"What better way to alleviate suspicion?" said Pevensey. "He knew his sister's betrothed was drunk as a wheelbarrow. His own wits, he took care to keep about him. The swim was dangerous, but a calculated danger—and he must have had confidence enough in his own powers of attaining the shore."

"Clearly, Aldine treated Lady Helena abominably. And I don't know Tilbury well…but—murder? Does his character make such an accusation plausible?"

“That, my friend, is the crux of everything. I could confront Tilbury again about the duel, but he would deny it. He forbids me to speak to Lady Helena. And although Sir Richard may gladly give me a writ demanding she answer, I cannot help but think she would be in the dark about the true nature of both her betrothed and her brother.”

Even as he spoke, Pevensey wondered—were his qualms reasonable or were they merely an excuse? Was he trying, by any means, to avoid arresting the brother of Miss Cecil’s friend for the murder of her friend’s betrothed? He could hardly hope to call on her again after that eventuality.

“Perhaps I’m grasping at straws,” said Cecil, “but could there not be some other party who wished Will ill? Some party who paid a tall, masked man to pay the boatman?”

“Aye, there could. But we have not stumbled upon him.” Pevensey looked at Cecil thoughtfully. He had never been the type of investigator who worked on a team. He had never enjoyed the back and forth of alternate theories when it seemed so much faster to just come up with the *right* solution on one’s own. And Cecil was not even a denizen of Bow Street. But he was learning—fast. And he had certainly proved his mettle in the undercover work down at the docks.

Cecil stood up and paced the room. “Perhaps revenge is not the motive—perhaps it’s something else. Money? A jilted lover?”

Pevensey rose to his feet as well. “I hardly think the courtesan at the theater would have cared enough to kill. She’s already moved on to a new lover, by the sounds of it. But money—there’s a trail we have not run down. It is most curious that the viscount should suffer a collapse at the same time as his heir. If he does not recover, where does the money go?”

“Lady Worlington would know,” offered Cecil. “She seems a sensible woman and not given to vapors. My sister quite liked her.”

“Then I will pay another visit to the Aldine house.” Pevensey’s thin red eyebrows crinkled. “And if we come up short there, then the death is back at Tilbury’s door. Perhaps you ought to make your way to the gaming hell and ascertain whether Tilbury stepped out of the room for a significant portion of time during the course of the evening. The hell was close enough to the wharf, but if he was at a table the entire time, he’d have had no opportunity.”

“And if I find he *did* have opportunity?” Cecil picked up his hat, eager to move on to the next step of the investigation.

“We’ll bring him to confront Dickie Pike in the light of day and let

the lad say whether he thinks he might have spoken to him from behind the mask."

The two men put on their hats, descended the stairs onto the pavement of Bow Street, and then shook hands before separating. "Oh," said Cecil, almost as an afterthought, "my sister says I'm to ask you to dine with us on Twelfth Night." He paused, awaiting a response.

Pevensey arrested his step. The only member of the upper class he had ever sat down to dinner with was Sir Richard Ford. And now the Cecils were inviting him as an equal? He could only assume it would be a private family gathering and not a formal dinner with their friends from society, but it was perhaps an even more dangerous invitation since it promised an intimacy that ought to be forbidden.

"…if you're not otherwise engaged," said Cecil, his eyebrows lifted in question.

"I would be delighted to accept," said Pevensey, killing his qualms with that one statement. The Cecils would be gone soon enough. This dinner would be his farewell.

CHAPTER 26

Maud looked at the grandfather clock. It was half-past three. There would be no callers today. Her mother's tambour frame sat across from her in the parlor, but Juliana had not come downstairs to make use of it. A thought came into Maud's head that she might pay an unorthodox visit to the Angiers' house. Helena could use another shoulder to cry on, for she was doubtless still weeping at the demise of her beloved.

But the thought no sooner came than Maud dismissed it. No, Lord Tilbury had made it quite clear that—whatever might have transpired in the past ten days—he was now no longer interested in improving his acquaintance with her. And what is more, there was a distinct possibility that Victor Worlington might be in attendance at the Angiers' home. At the funeral reception, had he not entered on the coattails of Lord Tilbury?

It was beyond doubt that Victor's poison was the reason for Lord Tilbury's sudden coldness toward her. She had spent so much time worrying that Victor would publish her foolish letter to the public that she had neglected to worry about how he might share it around in private. Maud's face flamed red and her stomach twisted inside her. She could not bear to imagine Lord Tilbury reading her incriminating flourishes, but imagine it she must.

Her mind conjured up his green eyes, so self-assured for the rest of the world and yet so tender when they lit upon her. She twisted the black fabric of her skirt against her palm. That tenderness was all turned to scorn now. He could hardly stand to look at her when she greeted him in the receiving line.

Maud winced, her heart's pain transmuted into a physical throb of discomfort, and sunk onto the sofa. At least there was one blessing in all of this—when Victor called for her after Twelfth Night was past, she had made up her mind that she would refuse to go with him to Devon. What did it matter if he published her shame to the ton? The one person whose good opinion she most cared about already knew

the whole of it. She could fall no lower in the esteem of Geoffrey Angiers, and so it mattered not at all if her reputation fell to the ground and shattered irrevocably in the eyes of the world. Let Victor do what he would—she would live in poverty and disdain before she put herself in his power again.

Maud heard a knock on the door outside the entrance hall and froze like a rabbit hearing the first bay of the hounds. Geoffrey? Victor? A moment passed, and then another. Fullerton entered the parlor, his face disapproving. "The Bow Street Runner, Mr. Pevensey, is here again, your ladyship. Should I send him away?"

Maud's lips parted in surprise. It must be that small, red-haired fellow that Sir Richard Ford had brought with him. She knew he had returned once or twice to interview the valet and nose around, but as far as she knew, nothing had come of the inquiries. Will's death was clearly nothing more than a drunken accident. "No, let him come in," she said, her curiosity piqued. A distraction of any kind was better than the cold despair of her own thoughts.

O

"THANK YOU FOR receiving me, Lady Worlington," said Pevensey. He took the chair opposite the lady and took in her appearance. She was of less than average height, with a pleasing figure, dark hair, and eyes that might have sparkled had they not been so hollow. "I believe it was you who first informed Bow Street about the unfortunate events?"

"Yes," said Lady Worlington simply and then let the conversation lapse into silence.

"We have had success in locating the boatman involved in the incident," Pevensey offered. He scrutinized her carefully as he spoke, admiring the curve of her jaw. She would be a fair study to sketch later, although in the last couple days, his sketchbook had been devoted to likenesses of only one lady…. He cleared his throat. "It appears that the drowning was not accidental."

Lady Worlington stared, lips parted but offering no exclamation of surprise.

"During the time that your brother was in the gaming establishment, a masked man, fitting the description of Lord Tilbury, approached the boatman and asked him to scuttle the wherry during his next crossing."

Lady Worlington gasped audibly. "What do you mean 'fitting the

description of Lord Tilbury'?"

"Tall, fair—" Pevensey shrugged. "But, yes, masked, so the man could not name him for certain." He looked at Lady Worlington thoughtfully, wondering whether her agitation was greater at the thought of her brother being murdered or the thought of the perpetrator being Lord Tilbury. That was one twist he had not foreseen—that Will Aldine's sister might have a *tendre* for the man who hated him.

"Are you aware that Lord Tilbury was at odds with your brother?"

"No. That is to say, yes, I knew that he was not fond of him. But to try to drown him? It makes no sense."

"Oh, I think one can imagine a circumstance where it would be rational." Pevensey shrugged. "Lord Tilbury, I have observed, is very attached to his sister. If he had learned something about your brother's behavior that would imperil Lady Helena's happiness—"

"Enough!" Lady Worlington rose to her feet. "If you have evidence of such a thing, why come to me? What can I possibly add to this investigation that you seem to have solved so cleverly on your own?"

"Lady Worlington," said Pevensey modestly. He rose to his feet as well. "I grant that the evidence, at the moment, points to Lord Tilbury, but I would prefer to explore every avenue before jumping to that conclusion."

Her breathing was quick and shallow. "There are other avenues?"

"Of course there are. Let us sit down and start over, if you will." He gestured to the sofa and she sat down again warily. "First, let me put to you this question: who profits monetarily at the death of your brother?"

She deliberated a moment. "Why, I suppose in the long run, it would be my cousin Stapleton."

That, Pevensey had not expected. He asked several more questions regarding Stapleton Aldine's connection to the family and received the details of the entail. Then he pressed for more—what was Lady Worlington's assessment of her cousin's character? At first, Lady Worlington seemed reluctant to discuss her cousin in depth—Pevensey could think of only one reason why that should be the case.

"You will pardon me, my lady," he said, "but would it be correct to surmise that your cousin was interested in you romantically?"

It was a lucky guess, but her gasp confirmed it. And following that disclosure, she freely admitted all the details she knew surrounding Stapleton's home, child, and financial state. "But surely, you don't

think Stapleton or Eustace had anything to do with this?" she asked as he stood up to leave.

"I have no conjectures on the matter," said Pevensey, as he proceeded to sow the seeds of conjecture abroad. "However, it does seem that your cousin had just as much motive as Tilbury. With your brother soon to marry and have children, any chance of receiving the entail would be gone forever. Could it be that your cousin's own finances are so encumbered that he thought it imperative to move your brother out of the way? I will keep you informed, my lady, as the case progresses."

As Pevensey let himself out through the entrance hall, he passed one of the housemaids he had interviewed on an earlier visit. Summoning up a grin and a wink, he received a saucy smile back in return. "Any more sightings of the Grim Reaper?"

"Lud, yes, sir!" The housemaid put down the tray she was balancing and leaned in confidentially. "I saw him just this morning. He's coming for the old master this time, he is."

"Betsy, that's enough of your rattling," said a firm voice.

The maid instantly quelled before the butler and scurried away with the tray.

"I do apologize, Mr. Pevensey," said Fullerton, escorting him to the door. "I believe Lady Worlington's lady's maid has an admirer from Devon who has been hanging about the premises, and the under servants have developed some theories of their own. I assure you, Mr. Pevensey, I do forbid novel-reading among the staff, but some of the maids do everything in their power to secrete Gothic romances inside their rooms, and the effect on their imaginations is deplorable." Pevensey exchanged a look of fellow-feeling. Clearly, the elderly butler was sorely put upon by his staff.

Still, a man watching the house was an irregularity that Pevensey could not ignore. "If you notice the man again, Mr. Fullerton, I wonder if you might do something for me?"

As the butler nodded his head, Pevensey handed him a card, with explicit instructions for what he should do if the shadowy watcher was found lurking around Grosvenor Square once again.

O

GEOFFREY POURED HIMSELF a drink of bourbon, downed it, and then poured another, barely pausing to admire the amber color of his liquid

courage.

"Steady, *mon frère*," said Louis, the Marquis de Montesquerrat. Geoffrey could feel the man's thick fingers removing the glass from his own.

Geoffrey nodded, almost imperceptibly. His friend was right. He needed his wits about him to correctly construct the snare he was about to lay. He had explained as much to the marquis on their carriage ride to the hotel. And Louis, to his credit, had absorbed the story without so much as a question. "*Eh bien*," he had said, "we shall beard this jackal in his den before the night is over."

Now they stood at the sideboard while Sir Victor and Captain Andrews swilled their own glasses at a nearby table. Something Sir Victor said set the officer off in a loud guffaw. The marquis eyed them curiously and then lifted his glass to his friend in salute. The game was on, in more ways than one.

It had not been entirely false when Geoffrey described his friend as a fastidious gambler. As soon as he had lifted his coattails to seat himself, the marquis assumed command of the deck and began to deal. Geoffrey sat across from him—partners in whist and, indeed, in everything else tonight. Captain Andrews made a coarse jest about the hand he was dealt, and instead of giving him a setdown, Geoffrey let loose a smile of good-natured bonhomie. He leaned back a little in his chair. They had hours to go before the trump card would be dealt. He must be shrewd, patient, and above all affable.

The marquis smirked unabashedly as he won hand after hand. Geoffrey had originally thought that it would be better to let Sir Victor win, but the marquis—even prior to the introduction—had made a different assessment of their opponent's character. "*Non, non, mon ami*, you do not want him to feel satisfied, to preen like a pretty lady's cat. He must feel a hunger for success, and that is when we—how do you English say it?—tighten the noose."

"What's this?" bellowed Andrews, standing at the sideboard. His nose was already as red as a coal. "We're out of Blue Ruin."

Sir Victor's eyes narrowed to slits within his round face. "The marquis, I think, can quite afford to stand us some more."

"Oh, by all means," said the marquis, swirling his own drink around the glass. At this response, Sir Victor rang for the hotel staff.

A brisk and efficient footman soon procured the men a new bottle of gin. Geoffrey took a deep breath, and then followed up the footman's departure with a calculated sigh. "I was hoping for a pretty

wench to bring that bottle. As I always tell the Duke of Brockenhurst, Maurice's has the prettiest maids in London."

Captain Andrews, as expected, turned that statement into a query about whether the ladies in question were in fact *maids,* and as Sir Victor dealt another hand, Geoffrey delivered his second sally. "I wish my friend here was as shrewd about petticoats as he was about cards. Tell me, Louis, why don't *you* stick to merry maids as the captain does instead of married women?"

The marquis shrugged, his ugly face the very likeness of sincerity. "What can I say? It is the thrill of the chase, *n'est-ce pas*?"

The captain inquired which married woman was the object of the marquis' attentions, but Geoffrey managed to be vague enough that his description could be traced back to half a dozen peeresses.

"But your chase has hardly been successful, has it?"

He jutted out an impudent lip. "*Au contraire*, I have some—how do you English say it?—*guarantees* that my attentions are very much to her liking."

"And what guarantees would those be?" Sir Victor asked slyly.

The Marquis adopted an air of complete innocence. "Why, letters, of course! *Parbleu*, what else could you possibly think I mean?"

The laughter was raucous after that comment.

"Ho ho!" said Captain Andrews, carrying on for a few seconds after the others. "Worlington has one too he keeps close about him."

"A married woman?" said Geoffrey, winking broadly.

"A letter!" cried the captain.

"You dog!" Geoffrey gave Sir Victor a friendly shove. He could tell from that saucer-faced smile that the man was enjoying himself.

"Shall we compare our little conquests then, Sir Victor?" asked the marquis, thumping his fist jovially on the table. "If only I had my letters here to cite verse and chapter, or to cast a wager upon whose mistress writes a fairer hand."

Geoffrey saw Sir Victor's hand move involuntarily toward the pocket on his waistcoat. So, he carried the letter upon him at all times. Suspicious devil—and rightly so. But he also had a certain looseness of the limb about him as he lolled back in the chair—he had drunk more than was good for him, and it would stand them in good stead.

"You are right to call it a guarantee," said Sir Victor, "for if the lady is…*expressive* enough in her prose, why then, you have your light o'love on a leash for as long as you want. She daren't say you nay or you'll have a present for the papers come Monday. And better yet if

the letter is from her to someone else!"

Geoffrey and Captain Andrews hooted loudly at this piece of advice. Geoffrey slapped his leg so hard that it stung—anything to keep his fist from smashing itself into Victor Worlington's face before the time was right.

"*Eh bien*, so that's the trick of it?" said the marquis. He held out his hand. "Come, let me see your own guarantee so I can know if mine are strong enough or if I must press for more."

Geoffrey held his breath.

Sir Victor belched loudly. Then inserting two fingers into his waistcoat pocket, he pulled out a well-worn piece of paper and tossed it towards the Marquis de Montesquerrat. Louis flicked it open, his thick eyebrows a picture of ribald delight. After a second, he glanced at Geoffrey and gave an almost imperceptible nod.

In unison, Geoffrey and Louis rose to their feet. Louis pocketed the letter and took a step toward the door so that Geoffrey was between him and the table.

"Thank you, Sir Victor," said Geoffrey coldly. His voice had lost every hint of merriment. "I'm obliged to you for the loan of this letter. I'll be returning it to the lady to whom it belongs."

Realization dawned swiftly in Sir Victor's eyes. "Bastard!" he shouted, and a string of stronger names as he swayed unsteadily to his feet. Captain Andrews, his hand on the gin bottle stared stupidly at the scene—he would need it explained to him in the morning, just what exactly had happened to break up the game of cards.

Sir Victor attempted to push past Geoffrey to get to Louis, but Geoffrey lifted his forearm and rammed it hard into his rival's chest. "You're a bastard yourself, Worlington. How dare you attempt the seduction of a lady of quality in such a manner!" They jostled against each other, feet planted. Geoffrey was acutely aware that the burly man had nearly two stone on him, but Geoffrey had the advantage of height and reach.

"Faugh!" Sir Victor growled, stepping back. "The letter means nothing! I can still ruin that trollop's name any time I please."

"Which is why I demand satisfaction from you," said Geoffrey, "at the earliest opportunity." He spat downward, letting his spittle fall on Sir Victor's black military boots.

The round-faced man grinned scornfully. "A challenge? From you? Of course, I accept."

"And I will second you!" said Captain Andrews, his words slurred

as his head bobbed precariously over his glass.

"Good—we keep this between the four of us then," said Geoffrey. He had already ascertained Louis' fervent assurances that he would second him in the field. "Send Captain Andrews to me tomorrow to determine where we shall cross blades."

"Very good," said Sir Victor with a sneer, "but it shall not be swords, Tilbury. *You* issued the challenge, and therefore *I* am allowed to choose the weapon."

"Of course," said Geoffrey, with a grim smile. He made his opponent a mock bow and then glided backwards toward the door.

Louis was already hurrying ahead of him, and he took the carpeted hotel stairs two at a time. Once out the front door and inside the closed carriage, Geoffrey reached across the seat and gripped the marquis' hand fiercely. "You were perfection, Louis."

The marquis smiled modestly. "As were you. Everything goes according to plan."

"Almost," said Geoffrey with a small groan. He leaned back against the cushions. His métier was the sword. And while he was an adequate shot with the pistol, he doubted whether he was skilled enough to both silence Victor Worlington and keep himself unscathed.

The Eleventh Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 27

Ralph sat down at his desk, unready to begin the day. He had a stack of wills and codicils that needed reviewing, but his mind refused to stay within the four walls of his office. It was clear that his father's life hung by a gossamer thread. Today he might give up the ghost—or tomorrow if the thread was a hair thicker than surmised. Ralph could not help but worry over the circumstances Lady Juliana and his sister would find themselves in—and then there were…others, whose plight distracted him as well. Ralph looked at the ceiling and said a silent prayer for Lady Helena. What must she be suffering with her uncertain future, forced to face the inevitable on her own?

The door to the office opened, and his secretary announced Lady Worlington.

"Maudie!" said Ralph, rising from his desk to give her an embrace. Her black pelisse was damp from the rain, and a few drops ran off the dark feathers on her bonnet onto his shoulder. "Is it Father?"

"No, not yet," said Maud, tossing her sable muff onto an empty chair, "although Dr. Bowles says he will likely pass this afternoon." She began to wring her hands and pace the width of the small room. Ralph knew enough to wait until she was ready to speak.

At last, she stopped circling and turned to face him. "I need to tell you—that Bow Street Runner came to see me yesterday."

"Hmm…Jacob Pevensey?" Ralph remembered the red-haired fellow distinctly. He'd had all too sharp an eye when it came to spotting the wound on Will's shoulder, and Ralph had been forced to feign complete ignorance of the matter. It would be disastrous to drag the news of Will's duel with Tilbury into the public eye, and besides, they had sworn an oath that night that none of the three of them would speak of it—ever. "What did the man want?"

Maud swallowed hard. "Oh, Ralph! He says that Will's death was not an accident—the boatman was paid to sink the wherry. And the person that paid him is most likely Geoffrey!"

Ralph listened, wide-eyed, as Maud related the evidence about the

tall, fair masked man approaching the wherry.

"And Tilbury is the *only* suspect?"

Maud beat a helpless hand against the edge of the desk. "The only one that counts! Mr. Pevensey's doing his due diligence of course…he asked me all sorts of questions about Cousin Stapleton since the entail will bring the estate to him, and about Eustace, and what their relationship was with Will. I suppose money *could* be a motive. I suppose they *could* have hired some tall scoundrel to pass payment to the wherry man. But can you honestly imagine fat, sycophantic Stapleton embarking on a boat that he knew would sink? He would never risk his own life in such a manner!"

Ralph tapped his index fingers together thoughtfully. "You're right, Maudie. Stapleton never would. But Tilbury, on the other hand…."

Ralph sighed. He had seen Tilbury with three feet of cold steel in his hand, cutting and thrusting at Will until the callow lad begged for quarter. If the duke had meant to kill their brother, that would have been the time. But no, Tilbury had very much wanted Will alive. He had pinked him with a flesh wound in the shoulder as a reminder of what could have happened and then forced him to sign the betrothal documents by lantern light on the field of battle. It was a situation Ralph could not explain to Maud, however. Even if he had wanted to, the oath forbade it. And he could never expose Lady Helena's frailty in such a manner….

"The duke is fearless—he would not have minded putting his life in his own hands if he thought it the right thing to do. But I think if he had meant to kill Will, he would have adopted a more straightforward approach—"

"Stop it!" Maud put her hands over her ears and began to moan. "He would never! Why would he hurt Will? He had no reason!"

Ralph stared at his sister. How many times had she protested that Geoffrey Angiers was not a suitable match for her? But now that he was suspected of murder—why, all her protestations had flown out the window like an uncaged canary. All her normal poise had disappeared as well, and she was raving…like a lunatic. Like a lover.

"Does he mean that much to you then, Maudie?" Ralph asked gently.

"Of course he does!" She was nearly weeping at the thought of it. "But it doesn't matter in the least now, for he doesn't care for me. I've seen Victor hanging on his sleeve, and I'm certain he's told him about

the letter. He despises me now—I know he does."

Ralph swallowed. Now was not the time to explain Lord Tilbury's association with Maud's stepson.

"And that's why *you* must go to him, Ralph." She seized his hand in hers, and the touch of her skin held an almost feverish heat. "You must warn him what Pevensey suspects."

"All right, Maudie," said Ralph soothingly. "All right. I will do so without delay." He pressed a kiss to her hand. "But you must promise me to go home and lie down. You're overwrought. And the Lord knows you have enough to deal with tomorrow without worrying yourself sick over Lord Tilbury." He carefully avoided any outright mention of Sir Victor, but the matter still hung in the air like the stench of sulfur. Tomorrow was the twelfth day of Christmas. Tomorrow was the day that Victor would call and demand from Maud her answer.

Ralph picked up the sable muff from the chair. "I'll see you home, Maudie, and then I'm off to Tilbury."

He cast a regretful look back at his desk. Those wills and codicils could scarcely wait another day, but he was too much of a gentleman to allow his sister to bear this burden on her own—and not enough of a gentleman to ignore his profession without financial peril. Ah well, he would burn the midnight oil, if he must, to ensure that his work was done on time. Right now, he had calls to make, information to provide, and hopefully some other information to receive in return.

O

PEVENSEY STRUCK THE door of Stapleton Aldine's house with the ostentatious mouth of the lion-faced door knocker. Clearly, this man had gone to some lengths to appear affluent, whatever his true financial circumstances might be.

A servant let Pevensey in, and within a few minutes he had been ushered to Mr. Aldine's study at the back of the house.

"Ah, Mr. Pevensey, what can I do for you?" said Stapleton Aldine. "There is no news about my poor cousin, is there? Such a regrettable accident for one so young, in the flower of youth, as it were."

"Indeed, there is some news," said Pevensey brightly. He took a seat opposite his host. His eyes fastened on Stapleton Aldine so as not to miss his reaction. "The accident has been determined to be a murder." In concise detail, he relayed Master Pike's confession.

“Egad!” said Stapleton, his fat face quivering a little. It was either genuine surprise or very well feigned. “A most lugubrious piece of news. And this tall, fair fellow—you don’t think it could be Lord Tilbury, do you?”

“Do you?”

“I don’t see how it could be. The man was with us the whole time inside the gaming rooms.”

Pevensey pursed his lips and nodded. And yet, Cecil had come round this morning with evidence that Tilbury’s name was not in the betting book more than once. As an observer and not a participant at the tables, he could easily have disappeared for ten minutes or more on the excuse that he had gone to relieve himself.

“Did he seem out of sorts with Mr. Aldine?”

The heavyset man hesitated. “I shudder to think what implications this might have, but yes, he was quite angry with Will. One does not like to speak ill of the dead, but it is impossible for a man of principle to stay silent in the interests of justice. In short, there was some talk at the tables that my cousin was keeping a mistress, and Lord Tilbury—as you might imagine—took the news quite ill.”

So, Tilbury had not known about Aldine’s ladybird at the King’s Theatre until that night? Pevensey heaved a sigh inwardly. He had been hoping to exonerate the duke, but this bit of news was another strike against him.

“Did he react physically?”

“He tried to slope off on his own,” said Stapleton Aldine, “but I persuaded him to help me get Will home. The lad was dead drunk, and too much of a weight for me to carry.”

“And he did *not*, at any time, slope off on his own?”

“No, Mr. Pevensey, I am very certain that he did not. For he was with us, you know, when the boat went under.”

Pevensey nodded. Here was a conundrum. He had been certain that Stapleton, if he were guilty, would do everything in his power to implicate Lord Tilbury once the drowning was known to be a murder. And yet, here he was, claiming that Tilbury had no opportunity to leave the group, don a mask, and approach the boatman with the twenty-five pounds. Was the man too stupid to see which lie would best serve his self-interest? He pulled out his notebook and began to sketch, allowing a lull to permeate the interrogation as he prepared to change the subject.

“I understand that you had hopes of contracting a marriage with

your cousin Lady Worlington."

Mr. Aldine looked surprised that such knowledge was in the public domain. "Indeed, it was a matter I had discussed with my uncle for some time. It seemed a natural and desirable step, to unite the two branches of the family in the bonds of matrimony."

"Had you broached the subject to Lady Worlington?"

"I had been attempting to do it for several days since she returned to the metropolis, but an auspicious time did not present itself. I made the unfortunate mistake of addressing her on the matter at a public assembly, the day before the sad event. While she was honored by the proposal, I believe it surprised her too much to be able to accept."

Pevensey smiled inwardly. So that was how Aldine explained her lack of enthusiasm on the matter. "Did anyone else know of your proposal or her refusal?"

"Dear me, I may have mentioned the matter to a few people before the event—and to Eustace, of course. As to her refusal, I certainly would not like to embarrass her by spreading around such news."

Pevensey's eyes filled with laughter—or embarrass *himself!* "Ahem, so the tragedy, as you say, occurred the following day. According to the articles of inheritance, it appears that your cousin Will's death will benefit you monetarily."

Mr. Aldine had the grace to blush. "I may see a small change in circumstance, Mr. Pevensey—I never expected the entail to affect me, but Providence or chance, whatever you prefer, has dictated otherwise."

"More than a small change, I hear. I went to see Mr. Abram this morning, and he mentioned that you were owing a pretty sum to one of his brethren. You're cleaned out, Mr. Aldine. In a word, bankrupt."

Mr. Aldine colored a deep red at this charge.

Pevensey tightened the screws. "I also learned that you pawned certain rings to make up your last payment. I can see the spaces on your fingers now where those rings used to be."

The heavy man was sputtering inarticulately now.

"I would say that your cousin's death was more than a small change. It was a *necessity*. And if so, did you necessitate it?"

"Now see here," bellowed Mr. Aldine, rising from his chair. "This accusation is preposterous in the utmost! If I'm as impecunious as you claim, where would I obtain the twenty-five pounds the boat boy says he was given? And even in a mask, he'd hardly think me tall and fair."

"Why, as to the first charge," said Pevensey, rising to his feet as

well, “Mr. Abram says that you reserved for yourself a sum in the amount of fifty pounds from the pawning of your rings. And as to the second charge, you may not be tall and fair, but your son Eustace certainly is.”

“Hogswallow!” said Stapleton Aldine, all his fine words gone out of the window at this unexpected accusation. “I’ll have you know that the fifty pounds are for Eustace’s Oxford fees. Eustace is a model son, a fine specimen of a student, and a good friend to young William. I’ll not have you saying otherwise, sir, or I must ask you to leave this house!”

“Call the lad,” said Pevensey evenly. “I’d like to hear how he was occupied on the night Will Aldine met his death.”

“As you wish, sir!” said Mr. Aldine, about to choke on his spleen. “But I daresay you’ll find nothing more nefarious about his activities than a night of studying in his room.”

CHAPTER 28

After depositing his sister at home, Ralph decided to walk the few blocks that would take him to the Angiers' house. The butler admitted him to the duke's study where Tilbury was standing behind his desk unlocking a large wooden case.

"Ah, Ralph!" said the duke. "I'd intended to call on your office this morning."

"Then how fortuitous that I am here," said Ralph. He extended a hand to the duke and shook it forcefully. "My news first, and then you shall give me yours."

The tall duke laid the small key upon the box and looked at him expectantly.

"Maud's been to see me this morning. Apparently, that Bow Street Runner Jacob Pevensey is convinced that Will's drowning was no accident. He means to have the boat boy identify you as the man who paid him to sink the wherry."

The Duke of Tilbury emitted a snort of disgust. "He was laying those bricks when he was here last to interview me. Apparently, he's taken an aversion to me and will construct whatever story he can to wall me in."

Ralph hesitated, unwilling to accuse this man he trusted of murder but also unwilling to let the conversation stop there. He had not trained as a solicitor for nothing—to ask one's clients probing questions was the mark of a professional. "Is there any evidence he might find to support the notion?"

"No!" said Tilbury. "Although, I suppose I might have been arguing with Will rather loudly as we left the hell to return to the river." He glared at Ralph. "You might have warned me, you know, that Will had an arrangement with an actress."

Ralph's eyes opened wide. "I did not know." His heart burned hotter inside him—how could a man who had Helena Angiers in his pocket even think about dallying with another?

"I see," said Tilbury grudgingly. "I won't fault you then. But

knowing what I do of his character, I can't say I'm entirely sorry that things ended the way they did—so if that makes me guilty of murder, then by all means let the magistrates haul me in to Bow Street." He folded his arms across his chest. "You say your sister brought you word of this. What is her opinion of the matter?"

Ralph was not ready to reveal just how distressed Maud was upon receiving the news. No, let her tell Tilbury herself when the whole matter had concluded. "She thinks you innocent, I believe, and wished me to take steps to warn you."

Tilbury breathed a sigh of relief. "I was afraid she would despise me forever." He uncrossed his arms and leaned forward against the desk. "But on to my news now. I have it."

Ralph understood immediately. "I assume you want to give it to her yourself?"

Tilbury smiled self-deprecatingly. "Yes, rather. But there is one more thing I'd like to send with it. Do you know exactly how many pounds were settled on her?"

Ralph named the sum.

Tilbury opened a drawer to extract a blank sheet of paper and presented it to the solicitor. "If you would be so good, please draw up in legal terms a transfer of that amount from Sir Victor Worlington to your sister."

Ralph raised an eyebrow as he took a seat at the opposite side of the desk and dipped the pen in the inkwell. "And just how do you plan to compel him to sign this?"

"I have my ways," said Tilbury. He lifted the small key and opened the case on the desk. Inside lay a set of dueling pistols. The ivory handles were well worn—they must have belonged to the duke's father, but the way the duke was handling the stock showed that he had used them himself more than once.

Ralph sucked in a deep breath. "You mean to duel with him?"

Tilbury looked at him frankly. "Yes, tonight. As we discussed, Aldine. Someone has to make that bastard choke on his own tongue."

"But I assumed you would fight him with the sword! Sir Victor was reputed the finest shot in his regiment. He could kill you!"

"Or I could kill *him*," said Tilbury. He lifted the pistol and pointed it at one of the gilt picture frames in the study. He closed one eye. "You know the rules. The challenger does not get to choose the weapon. I was lucky last time that your brother was familiar with neither and thought he had a better chance of surviving a sword

bout."

"But…your sister!" said Ralph, rising to his feet and tossing the pen away like a piece of straw. "What if the worst should happen? Blood and thunder! She will be all alone."

Lord Tilbury put the pistol back in the box. "I will take measures to ensure she is safe."

Ralph fumed inwardly. It was all well and good for Tilbury to rescue Maud from the scrape she was in, but Lady Helena, he knew, was in a worse one. Maud could possibly weather her scandal. Lady Helena would be ostracized from society for life. "She needs a husband, Tilbury! And barring that, a quiet place to retreat to the country, a place where no one knows her. She can call herself Mrs. Smith and stay there until after the lying in. You must give out a story that she has traveled abroad due to her grief over Will—anything to keep someone from looking for her in a little cottage in the countryside."

"I may be young," said the duke coolly, "but I am not unaware of how things are done." He looked at Ralph curiously. "You have always done your duty by Will, even in death. Do you want the child yourself?"

Ralph paled. The child? No, he wanted the woman! But the child he would love for her sake and try not to despise it for Will's. His own mother had been too desperate to keep him, and even with as much love as Lady Juliana had offered, he had felt the loss keenly all his life. "If you mean to take the babe away from Helena and put it in a foundling home, I will take it instead. But it were better for the child that she should marry and give the child a father and a legitimate name. Trust me,"—his voice turned bitter—"I know the lack of a marriage license all too well."

"Trust me then to manage it," said the duke. Ralph looked into his eyes and felt a small measure of reassurance. As long as the duke lived, Helena would be well. But if he should die with Sir Victor's bullet through his heart? The happiness of both their sisters was at stake.

"Now then—" The duke gestured to the paper that lay unfinished on the desk.

Ralph seized the pen that he had let fall and scrawled out the rest of the note. "There," he said, pushing it across the desk to the duke. "I will pray for you tonight."

"My thanks," said the duke. "And not a word to your sister until I

have the means to make amends."

O

PEVENSEY WAS QUITE aware that it was tea time when he called on the Cecils that afternoon. He had already made up his mind that Miss Cecil would invite him to sit down with them and he would not refuse the offer. As usual, his predictions proved correct. He had no sooner entered the house than he found himself reclining on the sofa with a plate of biscuits pushed into his hand.

"How was your visit to Stapleton Aldine's house?" asked Cecil. His own tea plate was teetering precariously with three sandwiches and half a dozen biscuits.

"Unsatisfactory," said Pevensey. He took the teacup from Miss Cecil's hands and shot her a look of wordless thanks. She set her own cup down on the table and picked up her embroidery. Pevensey suspected that many upper-class ladies pursued their embroidery only when in company for the sake of appearances, but Miss Cecil, on the other hand, seemed to be truly enamored with the activity.

"That sounds ominous," remarked the country squire. He washed down his next bite with a gulp of tea.

"Everything seemed to fit at first," replied Pevensey. "He has motive—the Jews are quite familiar with these things, and Mr. Abram assures me that he has exhausted all his collateral and depleted all his credit. His only salvation is the entail, and so Will Aldine's death must have been eminently desirable."

"Not to mention," said Cecil, "the good fortune of the viscount lapsing into a coma at the news."

"Exactly," responded Pevensey. He took a nibble at the biscuit and found it quite good. He wondered briefly if Miss Cecil had made them herself and then quickly dismissed the thought. "Besides motive, he also had the appearance of opportunity."

"How so?" demanded Cecil. He had emptied his plate already and was helping himself to another.

"From what I can gather, the outing was prearranged. Stapleton knew ahead of time what hell they would be going to, which dock they would use."

"Yes, but if we trust Dickie Pike's description of the man who approached him, Stapleton does not fit the picture at all."

"No, but his son Eustace does!"

“Indeed?” asked Miss Cecil, taking an interest. “So he is a twin of Lord Tilbury?”

Pevensey laughed. “I daresay no one would ever mistake them for each other—Tilbury is every inch a man, and Eustace Aldine is still a petulant child—but an indifferent description of both would call them tall and fair.” He flipped open his sketchbook to the correct page and showed the Cecil siblings a picture of Eustace.

“Hmm…” said Cecil. “You questioned Eustace then, I take it?”

“Naturally. And he is either a champion of liars or he was nowhere near the Thames that night.”

“Did he tell you where he was?”

“He was reticent to say in front of his father, but when I put the fear of the magistrate into him, he admitted that he had been out carousing with friends—officers of the king, no less. It seems the lad is tired of Oxford and is wishing to buy a commission—a sore point between them since Aldine senior has already laid out such a sum to finance his studies. He did not return home until after his father did that night. I have some associates tracking down the name he gave as an alibi—he says he was with a Captain Andrews. If his story holds water, then we’re back to Tilbury again—”

“Captain Andrews?” Miss Cecil’s voice was perplexed. She dropped her embroidery into her lap and stared up at the high ceiling of their rented house.

“What is it, Edwina?” asked Cecil, curious enough to ignore the tea table for a full minute.

“It could be a coincidence, but I think I met the fellow earlier today at the Duke of Tilbury’s.”

Pevensey and her brother stared. “Say on!” said the inspector, a light flashing into his gray eyes.

“Lord Tilbury sent a message late this morning asking me to wait upon him. I assumed, quite rightly, that it was about Helena. When I arrived, he met me in the drawing room. And then, very discreetly, he asked whether Helena had revealed her condition to me. I confirmed that she had indeed. He asked if she might come to Sussex with me for an extended stay, under a false name, to have the child there.”

“And you said?” interrupted Cecil.

Miss Cecil’s eyes sparkled. “Why, I said that I thought it a capital plan as long as my brother was in agreement, but since he was a good sort of fellow who looked out for the unfortunate, I could fairly safely answer yes for him as well.”

“Little minx!” said Cecil affectionately.

Pevensey watched the exchange with interest. Although Cecil was several years older than his sister, it was clear that they were equal partners in the management of their affairs.

“While we were speaking, Captain Andrews was announced. Lord Tilbury said he must take his leave of me, but he instructed me that if anything were to happen to him, I should continue with the plan to bring Helena to Sussex.”

“*If anything were to happen to him*?” Cecil repeated the words with a shocked stare at Pevensey. “So, he knows you’re on his trail—it’s almost an admission of guilt!”

“Perhaps,” said Pevensey. He rubbed his index finger against a red sideburn. “Miss Cecil,”—he leaned forward in his chair—“this has all been very helpful. I realize that you are not given to improprieties such as eavesdropping, but did you, by chance, happen to realize the import of this meeting and strive to overhear the conversation between Captain Andrews and Lord Tilbury?”

Miss Cecil smiled mischievously. “The butler was escorting me back to the door, but I told him that before I left, I should like to run upstairs and say a word to Lady Helena. I have been there often enough for the servants to treat me as family. I started up the stairs until I saw that the butler’s back was turned, and then I tiptoed back down the hallway to the drawing room and put an ear to the keyhole.”

Pevensey could not resist letting a sunny smile break out over his freckled face. Miss Cecil was so very resourceful and so full of good sense as well.

“Good girl!” said Cecil. “And?”

“It was all muddled, but I did hear the duke say something like ‘you choose the place,’ and then the captain replied something about ‘Camden.’ That was all I heard, and I did not want to be caught sneaking about, so I ventured back up the stairs, discovered that Helena was napping, and left the house without disturbing her.”

“Miss Cecil,” said Pevensey, taking his hostess’ fingers and holding them lightly, “you are a remarkable detective.” Had he been of her class, he would have pressed a kiss onto the back of her hand. As it was, he retracted his own hand slowly and beamed broadly in her direction.

“Do you think he means Camden Town?” said Cecil, brushing the crumbs off his trousers.

“Undoubtedly,” said Pevensey, jumping to his feet. “And you know what that means!”

“No,” said Miss Cecil, standing up as well. “I’m afraid I don’t.”

“It means a duel. Lord Tilbury will be participating in a duel at Camden Town tonight, and Captain Andrews has been sent as the second for the party involved.”

“A little too strange to be coincidence, don’t you think?” Cecil mused.

“Yes,” said Pevensey tersely. “I do. Either Tilbury is trying to silence someone who knows that he killed Will Aldine, or he has discovered the person responsible and aims to take care of the matter himself.”

Miss Cecil smoothed back one of her black curls. “What do you mean to do?”

Pevensey and Cecil exchanged a look. There was a fair chance that come nightfall Camden Town would have an extra pair of spectators hiding in the bushes. “But first, we shall stop at Bow Street,” said Pevensey, “for pistols. And Sir Richard may need some advance warning if we plan to bring in a peer of the realm for murder.”

CHAPTER 29

Helena was still taking meals in her room—which is to say she was receiving trays from the kitchen and eating nearly nothing at all. Tonight, Geoffrey asked Cook to send up his own dinner in the same manner, and at seven o'clock, after dressing in attire appropriate for the events to come, he followed the trays up the stairs and knocked on Helena's door. She was still in a dressing gown, her golden hair tumbling down about her shoulders, having refused to get out of bed all day or even to open the curtains.

"What are you doing up here?" she asked, as he pulled up a chair to her bedside and set his tray of stuffed veal on his own lap to eat.

"Keeping you company," he said. She took in that piece of information wordlessly, but it was more a sorrowful silence than stony. And although she only picked at her own tray like a sick sparrow, at least she ate a little. Geoffrey regarded her thoughtfully, sad that his own preoccupation with Victor Worlington had taken him away from her so much in her time of need. Faulty though his guidance had been, he was the closest thing she had to a father.

"I know it is too soon," said Geoffrey, after the maid had cleared away his tray, "but I must talk to you tonight about the future."

She turned her face away to look at the wall, and Geoffrey could see a solitary tear making its way down her cheek.

"I believe there are only two options open to us," he said.

"Us?" Her tone was scornful.

"Yes, us. Because you are not alone in this Helena. I will stand by you whatever you choose. Now then,"—Geoffrey tapped his foot repeatedly against the floor—"you can retire to the country to have the baby, or I can find you a husband who is willing to acknowledge the child as his own."

Helena gave a wail. "Oh, Geoffrey! Will was my life! I will never love again, and I cannot bear the thought of belonging to anyone else. How could anyone ever understand what Will meant to me?"

"Then the countryside. Miss Cecil could help support you in a little

cottage in Sussex."

"Indefinitely?" sniffled Helena, her white hand brushing the tears from her cheek.

"I daresay not," said Geoffrey. "Until you've had the baby, and then you would come back to London."

"And the baby?"

"I will find a family willing to raise the child."

"No! I will not be separated from him!"

Geoffrey was startled both by her vehemence and her decision that the child would be a boy. "But Helena, that is impossible. If you have no husband, then no one can know."

"You don't understand, Geoffrey! You never have." She clutched at the bedclothes with both of her hands. "He's all I have left of Will, and I will not give him up."

Geoffrey breathed deeply, trying to control his pique. She was being irrational—and even more so than usual. But if this were the last conversation they might ever have together, it was folly to provoke a quarrel. "Very well, then you shall keep the baby. I will contrive some way to…make this work." He had told Ralph that he would manage things—he might have known from past experience that managing things with Helena would prove far from straightforward or simple. "And Helena…?"

She looked at him through tear-stained eyes. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry." He leaned over the pillows and kissed her cheek. "I thought that once I was of age, I would be able to guide you through your first season as well as any mother or maiden aunt. I was an arrogant fool and *you* paid the price. I am deeply sorry for that—for everything that's already happened, and for everything yet to come."

"I don't know that you're exclusively to blame," said Helena with a wan smile, "but for whatever fault you may bear, I forgive you."

He stood upright and looked towards the door of the bedroom.

"I don't quite like the sound of that last bit either," said Helena, looking more alert than she had in days. She propped herself up higher on the pillows and reached out a hand to stay him. "What's yet to come?" Her eyes narrowed, and Geoffrey could see that she had finally noticed he was in boots, buckskins, and his oldest shirt. "Geoffrey, where are you going?"

"Out," he said simply. There was no further explanation he could give her. He lifted her hand and let it fall gently on the bed. There was no point in telling her that Montesquerrat would come soon with his

carriage and together they would travel through the darkness to a remote field near Camden Town. Sufficient for the day were its own troubles. He would see her tomorrow if he was still alive.

O

LORD ALDINE PASSED away in his sleep in the early hours of the evening. Lady Aldine, who had haunted his bedside like a ghost, was overtaken by a strange sense of peace now that the end had finally come. “I think I shall retire to my room now,” she told Maud, “and read a little before bed.”

Maud took her mother’s hand and pressed it, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek and a good night.

“You will let Ralph know?” said Lady Aldine.

“Of course,” said Maud, retiring to her room to find her writing materials.

A few minutes later, Fullerton interrupted her apologetically. “There’s someone to see you, my lady. I told him the house was in mourning, but he insisted. He refused to give a name.”

“It is probably someone from Bow Street,” said Maud, folding her note to Ralph and sealing it quickly. A tremor passed through her hands. Had they arrested Geoffrey? “I will come downstairs.”

The man waiting for her in the drawing room was a whole head taller than Mr. Pevensey. It took Maud a moment to recognize him, and when she did, the shock was not a pleasant one. “Bradstreet! What are you doing here?”

Her stepson’s valet smiled wolfishly. “Hallo, Lady W. And good evening to you! Sir Victor has sent me to inform you that his carriage will call for you at eight o’the clock tomorrow morning.”

Maud stiffened. “You can tell Sir Victor that I will not be going anywhere with him. He can do what he pleases, but I will not be returning to Devon.”

The valet chortled. “He thought as you might say that—given as how your fancy friend has served you up a pint of false hope. But Sir Victor says—it doesn’t matter if you have the letter. He knows what’s in it, and he knows what you are. You have no brother—and no father neither, by the sounds of it—to hide behind. Your fat cousin has quite given up on you, and in a few more hours, your fancy friend will be gone as well.”

By the time he finished this speech, Maud was shaking—an

amalgamation of fear and anger coursed through her veins. “Get out!” she said vehemently, her arm pointing to the door like a signpost.

Her insistence seemed to amuse him all the more, and after another chortle, he tipped his hat, which he had not bothered to take off while speaking to her. “Eight o’the clock, Lady W. Pack your trunk.” And then, with a careless saunter, he pushed open the double doors of the drawing room and let himself out from the main entrance hall into the forbidding dark.

Perkins, who kept a sharp eye on all her mistress’ appointments, did not even wait for Maud to return to her room. “Lawks!” she said, bursting into the drawing room. “That were Jeremiah Bradstreet, weren’t it?” She took Maud’s trembling hands in hers. “What did he say to you, my lady?”

Maud collapsed onto the sofa and pulled Perkins down beside her. “It was all so strange! He acted as if the letter had been returned to me by someone he called my ‘fancy friend.’ But Sir Victor still threatens to take me back to Devon with him—Bradstreet as good as announced that they plan to abduct me tomorrow morning at eight o’clock.”

“Hmph,” said Perkins, stomping a slippered foot on the wood floor. “We’ll not be going willingly, my lady.”

Maud’s heartstrings pulled a little to hear her lady’s maid throw in her lot with her. In a world that was quickly falling to pieces, at least she was not completely alone.

“If we only knew who your ‘fancy friend’ were, we might apply to him for help. Do you think he means your brother?”

“Ralph? It seems unlikely—but then, Ralph *is* the only one who knew about the letter. Perhaps he managed to retrieve it somehow?” Maud gasped. “But if so, then he is certainly in danger! Bradstreet said that my ‘fancy friend’ would soon be gone as well.” Maud jumped to her feet and rang the bell. “Fullerton,” she said, as the surprised butler floated into the room. “I need the carriage straightway.”

“Are you sure, my lady?”

“Very sure,” said Maud. “Perkins, please fetch my cloak. I need to see my brother at once, before it’s too late.”

O

“THIS CAPTAIN ANDREWS, he is an idiot,” complained the marquis. The carriage bounced roughly as they headed for the northern edge of

London. Montesquerrat had chosen his valet to drive, instead of his regular coachman, since the matter required a high degree of discretion. “It is quite obvious that duels are illegal. It is quite obvious that most duels take place at Camden Town. And what does he do? *Parbleu*! He schedules this affair of honor at the very place where the authorities will be on the lookout.”

“I daresay it will be over so quickly that the Horse Patrol will be none the wiser.” Geoffrey splayed out his fingers, trying to keep them from forming into the hard fist that mirrored his insides.

Louis muttered something under his breath. It was too dark to see anything inside the carriage, but Geoffrey could sense the worry lines decorating his friend’s face.

“I’m not an awful shot, you know.”

“*Oui, oui*, but still, I wish the swords had been chosen.”

“Spilled milk, my friend. Did you bring the lanterns?”

“*Mais certainement!* But you see that the clouds have cleared! The moon is full, and *peut-être* you will be able to see what you are shooting at.” The carriage began to make a wide, sweeping turn and then rolled to a stop. The marquis peered out the window. “There is the windmill that idiot Captain Andrews spoke of—assuredly, the Horse Patrol know it well, for it is the only landmark worth noting.”

They waited in silence for a quarter of an hour until they heard the crunching rattle of another set of carriage wheels. Geoffrey took a deep breath and stepped onto the muddy field. The liquified dirt squelched with each step his Hessians took. The marquis followed behind him, carrying the box of ivory-inlaid pistols that had belonged to Geoffrey’s father.

A tall man—probably Sir Victor’s valet—sat up high on the opposite carriage box. “Is that you, Tilbury?” said a reedy voice. Out of the carriage door peeked a face as round as the moon above.

“Indeed it is, Sir Victor.”

“Well then, let us begin.”

There was a broad stump nearby the windmill. Captain Andrews debarked from the carriage with a lantern, and he and the marquis each brought their pistol cases to the stump and opened them up for the other’s inspection. The flints and priming were checked, and then, when they were satisfied that all was in order, each second offered a weapon to his champion.

The four men stood in a semi-circle in the open field with the windmill’s long arms making spider-like shadows in front of them. “As

the challenger," said Montesquerrat, "Lord Tilbury must state what level of satisfaction he demands."

Geoffrey hesitated. Ralph's voice rang in his head—"But what about your sister? She will be all alone!" It was true—he had failed Helena once already, and if he fell here at Camden Town, he would fail her yet again. But in front of that thought another image soared—Maud Worlington in her scalloped red dress. He felt the longing in her lips and the desire in her embrace from that enchanted moment under the spell of the mistletoe. He felt the fear in her face and the panic in her step as she tried to melt away from Victor Worlington into the crowd. And he felt the ache in her heart and the tears in her eyes from each pain that the world had inflicted. And he hoped—though she had taught him not to presume—that should he fall on this field tonight, some portion of those crystal drops of sorrow would water the ground for him.

"Come now," repeated Montesquerrat. "What level of satisfaction, your grace?"

"This gentleman has impugned a lady's honor and attempted to assault her virtue." Geoffrey's voice was as chilly as the pistol in his hand. "I demand satisfaction *to the limit*."

"*Vraiment*?" whispered the marquis. They had not discussed this in the carriage. "Surely first blood is enough, *n'est-ce pas*?"

Geoffrey shook his head.

"Very well," the marquis said, his voice carrying in the wind of the clear night. "The affair will be conducted *à l'outrance*. The first shot will be at ten paces' distance. May *le bon Dieu* defend the right!"

CHAPTER 30

Maud had never visited Ralph's lodgings before, and Fullerton insisted on accompanying her. "It is not in a part of town you are accustomed to, my lady." And indeed, the butler proved right. It was a small flat in a very unfashionable neighborhood near White Chapel. Maud looked askance at her surroundings before she rapped sharply on the door, feeling the chill of the evening even beneath her thick cloak.

It took several minutes before the door finally opened. There was Ralph, hair tousled, in his shirt sleeves and breeches. It had not occurred to Maud that he would have no servants to answer the door for him.

"Maudie!" He seemed more concerned than put out. Fullerton gave him a nod and then melted away into the background as Ralph ushered Maud inside the flat.

The sitting room was small, dark, and somewhat cold. Ralph laid a log on the banked fire and then excused himself to put on a dressing gown while Maud looked about herself. The spare furnishings emanated more utility than comfort. She removed her cloak, placed it on a hook that seemed designed for the purpose, and then sat down carefully on a stiff sofa to wait for Ralph.

After a brief moment, he re-entered the sitting room, a blue dressing gown cinched tightly about his waist. "Now then," he said, hanging an iron kettle over the fireplace, "we shall have tea shortly." He took up a seat opposite her in the only other chair the room contained. "Father?" he said simply.

"Yes," said Maud.

Ralph took a deep breath and raked his hands through his dark hair. Maud wondered if the blow was greater for him than it had been for her—up until two weeks ago, she had been used to her father's absence in her life, but Ralph may have had stronger ties.

"There's more as well." While the water heated, Maud told Ralph of Jeremiah Bradstreet's visit and threats and the strange insinuations

he had made about the inconvenient letter. “What did he mean by that? Did you get the letter from him somehow?”

Ralph formed his fingers into a triangle and tapped them together. “Not exactly. A friend provided some assistance.”

“A friend? Who?” Maud could sense that Ralph was reluctant to tell her.

“Lord Tilbury, to be exact.”

“What!” Maud shrieked, just as the kettle began to bubble inside. Seizing a rag to protect his hand, Ralph removed the kettle from the fire, and Maud saw that he had already set out a pot with tea leaves into which he could pour the boiling water.

“You told Lord Tilbury about the letter?” Her heart was overflowing with so many emotions that she could not place them all, but chief among them was anger.

Ralph gritted his teeth as he knelt over the fire, replacing the hot kettle on the hook. “In a word—yes.” He sat back down on the sofa, noting the look of rancor on her face. “Now, Maudie, listen to me. You must own yourself that things were at a desperate pass. I spoke to Tilbury after the assembly, and I had full confidence in him on two points.”

He waited. “You don’t ask me what those two points are?”

Maud raised both eyebrows in annoyance. “Oh, I am sure you will be only too happy to tell me.” All her gratitude to Ralph for managing matters over the past two weeks was beginning to turn to stomach-churning gall. How could he have revealed her most shameful secret? And to the person she would most wish to keep it from?

Ralph laughed lightly. “Very well. First, I was confident that he would have the wherewithal to obtain the letter; and second, I was confident that his affection for you would make him desirous to render that service.”

“So his association with Sir Victor at the funeral—that was a ploy to ingratiate himself?”

“Yes.”

“And it worked? He has the letter now?”

“Yes.”

“How could you, Ralph? To have him think thus of me…?” The unfairness of it all struck her like a slap to the face.

Ralph stood up and poured the tea into two cups with mismatched saucers. He handed one to his sister. “You care for him deeply.” There was barely any hint of a question in his statement.

Maud began to cry.

Ralph laid a hand on her shoulder. “Then eventually, my dear, you would have had to tell him. For what is love but to know another’s faults and choose to love that one anyway?”

At these words, Maud bit her lip. She did not realize her hands were trembling until some of the scalding tea splashed out of her cup and onto her lap.

Ralph acted quickly to remove the hazard to the narrow sideboard. “Listen to me.” He knelt beside the sofa and took her hands in his. “Tilbury knows it all now. He has made his choice—and his choice is you. Tonight will prove it beyond any words that I can say, and tomorrow will be a new day for both of you.”

His words were like a doctor describing the properties of a medicine, but without Geoffrey there to actually administer the physic, Maud could not feel the healing effect.

“Ralph,” she said slowly. “What did Victor’s valet mean when he said, ‘your fancy friend will be gone soon too’? What *aren’t* you telling me?”

He could have deflected her question like the deft solicitor that he was, but instead, Ralph grappled with it head-on. “You must believe me, Maudie, that it’s better left unsaid. It would do you no good to know of it tonight, and tomorrow I will tell you all.”

The explanation was not even remotely satisfying. Maud could tell from the set of his chin that she had little chance of wheedling further information out of him, but her desperation would not allow her to desist. “So he *is* in danger? And I can do nothing?”

“You can pray—pray for him without ceasing tonight until your eyes shut from exhaustion. And you can trust—trust that God will vindicate the right and overthrow the plots of the wicked. Come now,” he said, rising to his feet and offering her a hand to help her from the sofa. “I shall see you when I come by tomorrow to make the arrangements for Father’s funeral.”

The reminder of the other horrible event of the day shook Maud out of her insistence. Ralph was right, of course—she was verging on hysteria, and nothing could be gained by dwelling on Bradstreet’s cryptic threats at this late hour. When the full import of her father’s death sunk in, she needed to be at home, in her old room, surrounded by childhood tokens that would let her remember the best of him.

Maud sighed. “And with that, I suppose I must be content.” She stood dumbly while Ralph retrieved her cloak and put it around her

shoulders. He opened the door to the apartment, and Fullerton, recognizing the signal, exited the carriage and came back up the stairs to give her his arm.

"Good night, Maudie."

"Good night, Ralph." She wrapped her hand around the old butler's arm and looked up into his eyes. "Thank you, Fullerton. I am ready to go home now."

O

TEN PACES HAD never seemed so long a distance. Geoffrey's heart beat a thousand times with each step taken in the sucking mud. Captain Andrews and Montesquerrat had fallen back several steps to be out of the line of fire, and the redcoat was counting off the steps with military precision. "Seven…eight…nine…ten."

The last number was the signal to pivot. Both Geoffrey and Sir Victor swung round, fingers on the trigger, and fired simultaneously. Geoffrey knew as soon as the pistol kicked back in his hand that the ball had gone wide of the mark. He was also left with no doubt as to Sir Victor's aim as a searing pain ripped through his left shoulder.

Grunting loudly, Geoffrey dropped the empty pistol and clutched at his injured arm. The two seconds ran forward with their lanterns and the alternate weapons.

"Have you reached your limit? Are you satisfied now, Tilbury?" Victor's round face lit up like one of the garish glass lights at Vauxhall Gardens.

Geoffrey gritted his teeth, fighting back nausea as another wave of pain came over him. "I…am…not!" he shouted from between clenched teeth. "Again!"

"Geoffrey, *mon ami*," said the marquis, whipping off his cravat to tie around Geoffrey's bloody shoulder. "Are you certain you wish him to fire at you again? This wound here—you will not die from it. But the next shot may not be so kind."

"I am certain," said Geoffrey. This ogre would pay for the months, nay, years of torture he had inflicted on Lady Worlington. He shook off the marquis' ministrations and seized the other pistol. "Again!"

The ten paces were repeated, Geoffrey's step a little less sure than at first.

When the second bullet struck him, he did not even feel it, but suddenly his face felt warm and sticky. The marquis materialized

beside him. He had no second cravat to give, but he used his sleeve to mop the blood out of Geoffrey's eyes. He held his lantern high to inspect the damage. "A scalp wound!" he grunted. "Not dangerous, but it bleeds like *le diable*." He fixed Geoffrey with a stern look. "This is the limit, *oui*?"

"No," said Geoffrey, breathing deeply to chase away the sickness in his throat. "Reload the pistols, and we will fire again."

Captain Andrews clapped Sir Victor on the back and the two men dissolved into peals of laughter. "This is too rich a dish by far!" hooted Sir Victor in alto tones. "I must tell you, Tilbury. I was a little disappointed at first that you and the cousin didn't drown with young Aldine, but then, I would have missed this…entertainment!"

"*Mon frère*," said the marquis, taking Geoffrey's face in his hands and turning it aside so that he could not see Sir Victor's taunts, "two shots is mad, but three—it is barbarous."

Unheeding, Geoffrey pulled away from his friend and staggered forward. "Sir Victor, I will make you a proposal. On our third attempt, should I wound you with my shot, you will agree to return Lady Worlington's dowry in full."

Sir Victor cocked his head. "That certainly makes things more interesting. I will agree to it, Tilbury, but only on one condition: if I should wound you a third time, you will return to me my *letter*."

Geoffrey had been expecting a negotiation of this sort. It was all or nothing now, and he was determined to pull for prime. "I accept your condition," he said, gesturing again for Montesquerrat to reload the pistols.

Shaking his head, the marquis returned to the flat stump and set his lantern on the ground. He removed a paper cartridge from the pistol box, tore it with his teeth, and rammed it down the barrel of the pistol. Grabbing a second cartridge, he handed it to Captain Andrews who followed suit. The newly loaded pistols returned to their owners. The ritual of pace counting began again.

"One…two…three."

Geoffrey willed himself to walk forward.

"Four…five…six."

Geoffrey's long index finger cocked the weapon and hovered on the trigger waiting to pull.

"Seven…eight…nine…ten."

Geoffrey turned about, more slowly this time since he had the pain in his opposite arm to contend with. The shots were not in unison. Sir

Victor discharged his weapon first, but the pistol misfired while Geoffrey was leveling his gun. An oath burst from Sir Victor's lips as the lead burst from the second pistol. And then Sir Victor sunk to his knees. Geoffrey's bullet had sped true! The wounded man keeled over sideways into the mud while the other three came running.

Uttering expletives, Captain Andrews rolled his friend onto his back. Sir Victor's shirt front was a mess of mud and blood, but by the light of the moon and the swinging lantern, Geoffrey could see that he had struck the man three or four inches above the heart. Sir Victor's tall coachman who had been sitting at the ready on the carriage seat scrambled down to assist, shucking off his coat and pressing the sleeve hard against the wound. Sir Victor groaned and opened his eyes.

"Have you the paper, Louis?" asked Geoffrey.

The marquis drew the document Ralph had drafted from his pocket. He was singularly prepared, holding also a small quill pen and a stoppered bottle of ink.

"Later!" snarled Captain Andrews, feeling his friend's pulse and finding it steady.

"Now," said Geoffrey firmly. He knew better than to trust Victor Worlington to fulfill this promise at a later date.

"Dashed luck!" said Sir Victor faintly.

"Indeed," said Geoffrey, without a shred of sympathy in his voice.

The marquis dipped the quill and pressed it into the wounded man's hand. "Sign!"

In the end, Sir Victor made less of a squall over the paperwork than Will had. The signature was sloppy but legible, and Geoffrey had no doubt that Ralph could make it stand up in any court of law if challenged. Montesquerrat blew several times on the ink to dry it then secreted the precious document away in his coat.

"Help me move him, Bradstreet," Captain Andrews said. Sliding behind him, the servant lifted the fallen man by the armpits while Captain Andrews seized his legs.

"Halt, in the name of the law!" said a clear voice from the periphery of the windmill. Two figures emerged from the shadows, both carrying pistols of their own.

Geoffrey recognized the slight, red-haired man immediately—he had rather expected the Bow Street Runner to show up at Camden Town tonight. Thankfully, the deed was already done and could not be forestalled.

"Come to arrest me for dueling, Pevensey?"

“Regrettably, no,” said Pevensey, giving Geoffrey an apologetic shrug. “I’ve come to arrest you three”—he pointed at Sir Victor and the two men carrying him—“for the murder of William Aldine.”

The Twelfth Day of Christmas

CHAPTER 31

After a long night of waiting it out at the windmill, rousting a doctor to attend to Sir Victor, and depositing Jeremiah Bradstreet and Captain Benjamin Andrews at a cell in Newgate, Pevensey went home and slept like a dead man until nearly noon. Then it was back to Newgate where he took his time interrogating Andrews and Bradstreet, separately at first, and then together. Sir Richard arrived when he had almost finished and agreed with Pevensey's assessment that the captain should be let go. "My compliments, Pevensey," Sir Richard said, putting his handkerchief over the lower half of his face to block out the stench of the prison. "A lesser man would have been content to label Aldine's death an accident, and nothing more would have been said on the matter. Where is Worlington now?"

"He's back at his hotel under the care of a doctor. I daresay he couldn't move far if he wanted to, but just in case, I have him under watch and guard."

"A pity you did not arrive there sooner," said Sir Richard, "to apprehend the fellow he was dueling with as well. Any word on who it was?"

"I have my suspicions," said Pevensey, as they walked side by side to exit the prison, "but you know how it is when the scions of society are implicated. Dueling may be illegal, but the House of Lords will hardly convict one of their own."

"Quite right," said Sir Richard, "especially if that person was avenging Will Aldine's death. Ah, well, what is justice if not approximate?" Ducking out of the prison gate, Sir Richard removed his handkerchief from his face and took a breath of the somewhat fresher air on the corner of Newgate and Old Bailey. "I look forward to your report in full, Pevensey."

"Of course, sir," said Pevensey, striving to keep his grimace inside. The one thing his sketchbook did *not* contain was words, and he roundly rued each time a case concluded since it meant that he would be forced to string sentence after sentence together across two or three

sheets of paper.

It was not until five o'clock in the afternoon that he finished his report. On the way home, Pevensey remembered that it was Twelfth Night. It had been years since he had celebrated it with friends. Anxious to put his best foot forward, he stopped in at a little shop on the way home and purchased a *papier-mâché* box full of chocolate biscuits. That would do for Cecil. Miss Cecil required more study. He nearly bought a wrapper of cherry comfits, but at the last moment, he put it back, seizing instead upon a skein of deep blue embroidery thread, the color of Miss Cecil's eyes. "For your mother then?" asked the girl at the shop as she wrapped them up, making Pevensey feel a fresh wave of doubt about his choice.

When he arrived at Baker Street, Miss Cecil answered the door herself. Her dress was a fluffy pink confection that matched the pink in her cheeks, and her excitement filled the air. "Mr. Pevensey! At last!"

"I beg your pardon—am I late?" Pevensey's stomach tightened—he had been certain that he was at least a quarter of an hour ahead of time for dinner.

"Not at all. But Edward has been positively horrid and refused to tell me a thing until you should arrive."

"I didn't want to spoil the telling," said Cecil, playing the part of butler by taking Pevensey's hat and laying it on the hallway console table. Pevensey removed his frock coat, his meager gifts stashed in the hidden pockets.

"Now then, if you will be so good as to take my sister into the dining room," said Cecil, "we shall tuck in our napkins and eat."

"Famished again?" said Miss Cecil to her brother as she laid her hand carefully on Pevensey's arm. All the saucy smiles that Pevensey was used to bestowing on house maids disappeared from his arsenal, and he had to remind himself to look straight ahead and stop staring at her like a country oaf.

Miss Cecil took the head of the table, with her brother and Pevensey on either side of her. A servant came to lay the dishes for the first course. Miss Cecil picked up her spoon. "Now then—begin!"

Cecil shoveled in a bite of perch smothered in cream sauce and looked at Pevensey encouragingly. It was then Pevensey realized he had a very long story to tell before he would be permitted to touch a bite of food.

O

MAUD HAD AWAKENED before the rest of the household and was already peering over the tops of the bedclothes for an hour when the scullery maid slipped into her chamber to place a log on the fire. She dressed for the day and ate a lonely breakfast—consisting of a cup of tea and a piece of toast—in the library. True to his word, Ralph called at midmorning to pay his final respects to his father, but since Mr. Whittle, the funeral arranger, arrived shortly thereafter, there was no time to talk of other matters.

"I see that you are back to full health, sir," said Ralph in short, clipped tones. Maud could see that her brother was not his usual self. He was pacing, agitated, without the calm good sense that she had relied on so much in the last fortnight. Their father's death must have impacted him more deeply than she had realized.

"Indeed," said Mr. Whittle, choosing that moment to launch into a sneeze. "These winter maladies are frequent, but they never last long."

Lady Aldine came downstairs to join in on the discussion, and Mr. Whittle took a seat in front of the three of them. "Perhaps it is unfeeling to mention, but since you are quite familiar with the process now, it might be easiest if you just noted what differences you would like in the arrangements compared to…the previous funeral at this address."

Ralph shrugged and looked to the two of them. Maud's exhaustion ensured that she had no opinion on the matter. Lady Aldine ended up requesting that everything be "the same—but just a little more of it, Mr. Whittle. He was a viscount, after all."

In the end, Mr. Whittle talked them into trebling the amount of black crepe and ostrich feathers and doubling the number of mourners. "A long life deserves a long funeral procession," he remarked when Ralph attempted to curtail some of the expenditures. But rather than taking things in hand, Ralph sat back and allowed the costs to come as they might. He was undone in a way that Maud had never seen him. Lady Aldine laid a gentle hand on her stepson's shoulder. She was far more capable of overseeing the event than she had been for the last funeral—now that the worst had come to pass there was nothing left to do but make the best of it.

Seeing that her mother had things in hand, Maud pulled Ralph by the sleeve over to the window seat in the drawing room. "Well?" she whispered fiercely. "I have been patient."

Ralph sighed. He drew a letter from the inner pocket of his coat and handed it to his sister.

My Dear Lady Worlington,

I learned with regret this morning of the second bereavement in your family. While my condolences and prayers certainly cannot take away the grief at your father's loss, please accept them as coming to you in all sincerity.

A week ago you sent me a message forbidding me to send you any letters or call upon you. I beg your pardon for contravening your commands to deliver the enclosed. If it should please you to change your mind on the matter, I would be pleased to call upon you when my health permits.

Faithfully,
Geoffrey Angiers

Maud scanned the letter as quickly as her eyes could move, the urge to swallow the whole of it outpacing the urge to savor each word. Enclosed in this short missive, another letter fluttered to the table, creased, worn, and in a hand that Maud was intimately acquainted with—her own. She did not have to read a single word to know its contents—her regret over writing them had kept them fresh in her mind over the past months and years.

"Shall you do the honors, or shall I?" asked Ralph, looking over at the crackling fire.

"I shall," said Maud firmly. With thumb and forefinger she picked up this feeble scrap of paper that was a symbol of her own feeble folly. Striding over to the hearth she tossed it into the flames, watching it long after the edges had lit and curled, inhaling the acrid smell of its transformation from inculpating paper to blameless ash.

"He wanted you to have this too," said Ralph. He reached into his coat and drew out a larger sheet of paper, folded into quarters. Maud opened it, letting out a little gasp when she saw the terms outlined on the paper. It was her dowry settlement—not parceled out in a widow's annuity little by little over the course of the rest of her life, but returned in full! How had Victor been persuaded to sign this away?

Maud looked intently at the dark splotch beside the signature. "Ralph, there's blood on this paper!"

“So there is,” said Ralph. He did not elaborate.

“Is it…Victor’s?” His heart’s blood would have had to be shed before he would relinquish his hold on her.

“Possibly. It could also be Tilbury’s.” Ralph hesitated, as if unsure whether what he was to divulge might upset her too much. “He fought a duel to get this, you know.”

Maud rose to her feet, heart palpitating wildly. “Is that what he means by ‘calling on me when his health permits’? I must go to him immediately!”

Ralph shook his head. “Not now, Maudie. The surgeon was just arriving when I took my leave of him this morning.”

“Surgeon?” Maud gave a strangled gasp and caught at Ralph’s arm. The bodice of her plain black day dress was far too confining when her heart was about to burst.

Ralph nodded grimly. “Aye, to remove the bullet in his shoulder.” He covered her hands with his and gently pulled her back down to the window seat. “They’ll give him laudanum and he’ll be out for hours. Be patient a little longer, Maudie, and you shall see him soon.”

O

“So it was Bradstreet, the valet, who gave the money to Dickie Pike?” Miss Cecil was still trying to make heads and tails of the complicated scheme. “He is tall and fair, I presume?”

“Just so. He had been spying on the Aldines’ house for days, giving Sir Victor word of Lady Worlington’s visitors, comings, and goings. He entered the house last night, however, to threaten the lady, and Fullerton—the Aldines’ butler—sent a message round to me at Bow Street.”

“But why did he threaten Lady Worlington?” asked Miss Cecil, her pretty brow crinkled in consternation.

“Sir Victor was…how to put it…?” Pevensey could hardly stop now—Miss Cecil was such an integral part of this investigation that she deserved to know the whole of it. And yet, there were certain things one did not discuss in front of unmarried young ladies from the upper class.

“He had a fancy for his stepmother,” said Cecil succinctly.

“Heavens!” said Miss Cecil, making a face of disgust.

“Yes,” said Pevensey, reddening about the ears. “I believe there was some blackmail involved and that Sir Victor was attempting to

coerce her into becoming his mistress. Bradstreet was simply the messenger."

"Poor Lady Worlington!" said Miss Cecil. Her reaction to the news was not overstated, but Pevensey could see that she was quite shocked at the villainy. She pulled back one of the pretty black curls that had fallen around her face and tucked it behind her ear. "And did the butler give you news of this blackmail?"

Pevensey cast a sideways glance at Cecil's plate and saw that his taciturn friend had nearly finished his first helpings of every dish.

"Oh, Mr. Pevensey, I do beg your pardon!" said Miss Cecil. "It is quite rude of us to invite you to dinner and then prevent you from enjoying it. Please." She gestured to the roast beef, encouraging him to take a piece.

"No matter, Miss Cecil," said Pevensey gallantly. "I had rather satisfy your appetite for this story first. I learned of the blackmail later from Captain Andrews. The message from the butler was brief, but it did contain a physical description of Bradstreet. When I saw that he matched Dickie Pike's description of the masked man, everything began to fall into place."

"But why did Bradstreet—or Sir Victor, I suppose—want to do away with Will Aldine?"

"There's the rub," said Pevensey. "I don't think that was his original intention. Andrews says that Sir Victor, upon returning to London, began spying on all of Lady Worlington's visitors. Stapleton Aldine was at the house far too frequently for his liking. He began cultivating a friendship with Eustace, Stapleton's son, plying him for information, allowing him to join the inner circle of his officer friends. Andrews was none too keen on spending time with the lad—he called him 'an insufferable little bounder'—but he seems to be guided by Sir Victor in all things."

"Except when the noose is on the line," observed Cecil, taking a swallow of wine.

"Indeed," replied Pevensey. "Sir Victor observed Stapleton Aldine at the opera with Lady Worlington, and when Eustace told Sir Victor that his father meant to offer for her, Sir Victor was livid. He observed Stapleton's familiarity with Lady Worlington at an assembly and determined to act. He discovered Stapleton's whereabouts for the following night when Eustace complained about being excluded from the gaming expedition. Then he sent Bradstreet, masked, to slip a pony into the boatman's hand."

“And the valet even told him Eustace’s own complaint,” interjected Cecil, “that he was playing his friends a trick because they had gone to the hell without him.”

“But Stapleton survived the event,” mused Miss Cecil, “and it was Will who was drowned instead.”

Pevensey could see that she was mulling over all the implications that Will’s death had for her friend Lady Helena.

“So, the conversation I overheard?” she asked suddenly. “It had nothing to do with this? Was Captain Andrews’ visit to Lord Tilbury a mere coincidence?”

“Not at all,” said Pevensey. “Lord Tilbury seems not to have been aware that Sir Victor caused Will Aldine’s death, but somehow, he was fully aware of the man’s interest in Lady Worlington. Our conjectures were correct. What you overheard was Captain Andrews making arrangements for a duel at Camden Place. Lord Tilbury had made the assignation with Sir Victor.”

“To protect Lady Worlington’s honor!” Miss Cecil’s eyes were shining.

“It would appear so.”

The servant began to clear all the dishes from the first course to lay the dishes for the second one. From the corner of his eye, Pevensey watched the roast beef slip away.

Miss Cecil was equally perceptive. “Oh, pardon me, Hodge, but I do believe Mr. Pevensey is not quite done.” The servant returned to the table with the platter, and Miss Cecil leaned over to spear the best pieces of meat and put them on Pevensey’s plate.

A ragout, some macaroni, and cauliflower soon appeared on the table, and Miss Cecil ensured that her guest had some of these dishes as well.

“So the mystery is solved!” said Cecil. “And the results?”

Pevensey took his first bite and savored it before swallowing. “I daresay Bradstreet and Sir Victor will be brought before the magistrate, but—”

“They will get off easily,” said Cecil with certitude. “Bradstreet will claim it was all a lark and the drowning unintentional.”

“Will the judge believe him?” asked his sister.

“Perhaps—at the most he would be punished by transportation, but I don’t think he’ll hang.”

“And Sir Victor?”

“Sir Victor will repudiate Bradstreet’s story, deny involvement,

and get off scot-free."

"That's if he lives," interjected Pevensey. "The bullet wound Tilbury gave him is no joking matter. The doctor I summoned was not optimistic about an easy or full recovery."

"You know, I've been thinking," said Cecil, folding his hands behind his head and leaning back a little in his chair, "if we had come out from behind the windmill a little sooner, we could have stopped the duel before anyone was hurt." He raised his eyebrows at Pevensey.

Pevensey shrugged and addressed himself to the heavily spiced ragout.

"You knew Sir Victor would not go to trial," said Cecil with astonishment. "You let Tilbury try for justice instead."

"Trial by ordeal," said Miss Cecil softly.

Pevensey let the two of them speculate while he continued to eat.

"It was a near thing," said Cecil with a whistle, "for if Sir Victor's third shot had not misfired, it would be Tilbury at death's door."

Pevensey laid down his fork. "Oh, I think Lord Tilbury's French friend had things well in hand on that third volley."

"What do you mean?" Cecil leaned forward again, bringing the chair legs down with a thud.

"It was hard to see by moonlight, I grant you, but did you not notice the Frenchman pass a paper cartridge to Captain Andrews when he reloaded the pistol?"

"You think it was defective?"

Pevensey shrugged. "It did not seem like a typical misfire."

Miss Cecil looked at him with admiration, eyes shining as he finished his meal. Pevensey felt a surge of pride. He had experienced the grudging accolades of his fellow Runners at Bow Street and a few crisp words of praise from Sir Richard, but as his work was not held up to the public eye, there was little chance for the kind of admiration Miss Cecil offered.

"Shall we adjourn to the parlor?" she asked when she saw that he had finished. "We have an Epiphany cake for later."

"More?" Cecil groaned, clutching his stomach in mock pain. "I shall never be able to fit more in."

"I'm sure you'll manage," retorted his sister.

Pevensey stood up and moved behind her chair to assist her with rising. She flashed him a smile of wordless gratitude, and then, to his utter surprise, tucked her hand comfortably into the crook of his arm as they proceeded to the adjoining room.

CHAPTER 32

As the last light of the afternoon began to leave the London streets, Maud could stand it no longer. She had exercised quite as much patience as she possessed. Filled with resolution, she asked Perkins for her writing materials, but after dipping her pen in the ink, she sat frozen. What words could she possibly put on a written page? No, whatever must be said, must be spoken face to face.

"Perkins," said Maud, "ring for the carriage. I must change my dress and go out."

"Lawks!" said the lady's maid. "You're not going to visit Sir Victor, are you? Today's the day he said he'd call for you, and here it is after teatime and he's never come."

"No, no," said Maud. "I don't believe Sir Victor will be troubling us anymore." Briefly, she outlined for the maid just how thoroughly Sir Victor's iron grip on her life had been shattered and just who the agent of that enterprise had been.

"But of course, my lady!" said Perkins, gasping at the thought of the midnight duel that had transpired. "You must go to Lord Tilbury at once!"

Maud hurried over to the wardrobe. It must be blacks again—to wear anything else on the day after her father's death would be indecent—but Perkins was an artist with any color. The maid unearthed a flattering gown with some intricate lacework around the neckline and a necklace of jet to go with it. "You look enchanting, your ladyship," said Perkins. She moved quickly to cover Maud's dress with a cloak and then threw a cloak over her own plain dress. For appearances' sake, Perkins would chaperon her mistress on this unorthodox visit to the house of a gentleman, but Maud would doubtless want to have her meeting with Lord Tilbury alone. In a few minutes, they were rattling down the street in the Aldines' coach over the few short blocks that led to the Angiers' home.

O

GEOFFREY LAY BACK on the pillows, hoping the hammering in his head would not last into the night. The laudanum the surgeon had given him had numbed his senses during the bullet extraction that morning, but as the medicine wore off, his head began to feel like a blacksmith's anvil and his left arm hurt like the blazes. Max, the gardener, had moved the most comfortable settee out to the orangerie so that he could enjoy his tropical garden, but the light coming in from the glass windows was fading fast. Geoffrey shifted his position and felt a sharp twinge of pain. The second bullet had been no more than a graze, and at least the first bullet had hit his *left* shoulder. Even if it did not heal for several weeks, he could still feed himself. He could still fence. He could still write.

"Have any letters come?" he asked, aware that it had been less than a half hour since he had made a similar query.

"No, your grace," said the wrinkled gardener. He was pottering around the orangerie, trimming a leaf here, adding some water there, but really—Geoffrey could tell—doing little more than consoling the poor invalid with his company.

Geoffrey closed his eyes. It was impossible not to think of Maud's face. Ralph had visited early this morning—with an interesting proposition that Geoffrey had never expected, a proposition he would have to put to Helena later. But he had also made it clear that Maud still held some affection for Geoffrey and was worried about the unknown events surrounding him. Despite his growing pain, he had written her straightway—written before the laudanum had taken effect and while the surgeon stood in front of him, waiting with clean hands and a set of pincers. As of right now, there had been no reply, but even if she did allow him to call on her, it would be days before that could happen. His valet had helped him into a loose shirt after the doctor had bandaged up the shoulder, but he would not be able to shrug himself into a jacket for at least a week.

Eyes closed, he drifted in and out of consciousness until he jerked awake with another wave of pain and came to realize how parched his mouth was.

"Max," he croaked. "A glass of water, if you please."

Ceramic clinked against crystal as the water was poured at the small sideboard. Footsteps approached. When Geoffrey looked up, there was the most beautiful vision he had ever seen, pressing a drink of water into his hand.

"Lady Worlington," he said, struggling to sit up.

“Hush,” she said, laying a hand on his forehead and gently pushing him back onto the pillow. She lifted the crystal glass to his lips and let him drink. Then, when he had had his fill, she returned the glass to the sideboard and returned to him. There were no chairs in the glass room besides the settee, so she perched sideways on the edge of it, the line of her leg brushing against his side. Then she took his right hand with both of her own and pressed it to her lips.

Geoffrey stared, at a complete loss for what to say. The throbbing in his head was still there, but it no longer mattered. The pain in his shoulder was still there, but the touch of her skin had turned that dull ache into a different kind of fire.

“You are here,” he breathed.

“I came to say thank you.”

His thumb began to caress the back of her hand, and her cheeks turned a faint shade of pink. “Did you read it?” she asked shyly, no doubt already knowing the answer.

He had indeed read her indiscreet letter, and every sentence had filled him with anger—a white-hot fury not at Lady Worlington, but at a host of others. Anger at the aged baronet who had married her but left her unloved and unfulfilled. Anger at the pusillanimous curate who had flirted with her so carelessly and then handed this letter over to her tormentor. And most of all anger at Victor Worlington who had hunted her, trapped her, and toyed with her like a rabbit in a snare, gratifying his own pleasures by filling her with fear. “I did read it—I am sorry to say that I could not restrain my curiosity.”

“What must you think of me—”

She let go of his hand, but he seized hers more firmly and stopped her from pulling away. “Why, I merely thought that you could stand to gain some practice in expressing sentiments of that nature. I would be happy to oblige should you desire a new correspondent.”

Geoffrey raised his right hand to her cheek and brushed one exploratory finger over her soft pink lips.

O

MAUD’S LIPS PARTED halfway. “What do you mean?” She had expected something different—at least a word of reproach—but instead, he seemed to be renewing those sentiments he had expressed ten days ago in this leafy bower of an orangerie. He had read the letter, that testimony of her shame, and still, he wanted her close to

him. Her lips burned as his hand pulled away from her face, and a tear began to trickle down her cheek.

"Tell me, my clever Lady Worlington," said Lord Tilbury, and his voice took on a tender tone, "if I were to challenge you to another teahouse game, what word comes after *Letter*?"

"I do not know, your grace. What word should?" She was too frightened to hope, too hopeful to flee.

"Why *Longing* of course," said Lord Tilbury. He shifted on the settee and, with a wince, pulled himself up to a sitting position so that his face was now just a little higher than hers. "And after *Longing* comes *Love*. And after *Love* comes *Lips*."

"*Later*," said Maud, placing her hand lightly on his chest as he leaned towards her. She felt it rise and fall beneath her fingers, his heart racing as quickly as her own beneath the thin fabric of his shirt. There was no mistletoe here, no priming from four glasses of brandy, no magic from the midnight hour—but still, her senses began to riot uncontrollably. She was intoxicated by his presence.

"No, not *Later—Kiss*." He leaned forward, and his lips brushed lightly against hers.

"Wrong letter, sirrah," said Maud, breathlessly, her whole body yearning to respond, but waiting, still waiting for the something more that was to come.

"Mmm…is it?" asked Lord Tilbury, his nose nuzzling her face. "You were always better at this game than I, Lady Worlington. Would you do me the honor of making it *Lady Tilbury*? That is another 'L', is it not?"

And at that, she kissed him back, passionately, fiercely, and with all the intensity of her being.

Wherever the gardener and her lady's maid were, they had the good sense to leave the pair of them alone, for whereas their Christmas kiss had been brief and hurried, it was a good quarter of an hour before they finished their kiss on Twelfth Night. Geoffrey had forgotten his injury more than once when he tried to hold Maud in both arms and had been forced to yield to her cautions of, "Careful, my love! Careful!" And Maud had forgotten every doubt she had ever had about Geoffrey's youth and affections, reveling in the bliss of love returned and the promise of future joy.

Finally, they took their places on the settee side by side, Maud's head laid comfortably against Geoffrey's uninjured shoulder, and Geoffrey's hand clasping hers as they listened to the symphony of

raindrops on the glass panels of the orangerie.

"Lochinvar," said Maud softly. "Another 'L'."

"You were reading that in the library when you first caught my interest."

"It was a sign, I think." She looked up into his green eyes, truer than any emerald and twice as bright. "What does the poet say? 'So faithful in love, and so dauntless in war, there never was knight like the young Lochinvar.'" And she lifted her face to kiss him again, having learned enough of heartache to know that this happiness was beyond compare.

O

THE YULE LOG had burned down to a small stub in the parlor hearth, the small Epiphany cake had been eaten down to the last crumb, and Pevensey soon felt an anxious itch under his skin warning him that it was time to leave.

"We're back to Sussex in the morning," said Cecil with a yawn. "I don't know when we'll be in London again, but I imagine it will be late spring. May I pay you a call then?"

"Of course," said Pevensey. He had known, from the moment he walked through the door tonight, that this dinner was a farewell, but the finality of the Cecils' departure still descended on him like a funeral pall. "And may I say you have been most helpful with this investigation—the both of you." He nodded to include Miss Cecil. "Sir Richard would thank you most profusely if he knew what part you played, but as he does not, I am afraid I shall receive the credit in your stead. Stolen glory, I'll admit."

"Well-deserved glory," argued Cecil, his black curls bouncing in protest. He put a hand to his chin and rubbed his black sideburns. "I did little enough by finding the waterman—*you* pieced it all together. And Edwina's news helped, of course."

Miss Cecil smiled at Pevensey who was once again attempting not to sit too near her on the shared sofa.

Cecil's eyes flicked between Pevensey and his sister. He was a quick study, this country squire, and generous too though it were perhaps wiser not to be in this matter. "I must make sure everything is in order for the trip tomorrow," he said, rising from his chair precipitately. "Edwina can see you out." Clapping Pevensey on the back, he left the room quickly.

Pevensey felt his tongue clinging awkwardly to the bottom of his mouth. He had been alone with women countless times in the course of his investigations, but there was an atmosphere of possibility in this parlor he had never experienced before. “Have you packed all your things for the trip?” he asked, aware that something must be said to fill the silence.

Miss Cecil looked up from her embroidery, her brilliant blue eyes framed by her jet-black curls. “Yes, this morning.” She wove her needle into the side of her work to let it rest there while she spoke. “I have never been sorry to leave London, but this time, I think I may miss it a little.”

“Your friend Lady Helena will come stay with you soon though,” said Pevensey, “and perhaps bring a little bit of London society to Sussex.” He stood up from the sofa to excuse himself.

“Alas, no,” said Miss Cecil, rising to her feet as well. “I had a letter from her brother earlier this afternoon. He has changed the plan. He intends to see her wed and has found a suitable husband.”

“Indeed?” Pevensey raised his light red eyebrows in surprise. It was not so easy to find a gentleman who was willing to raise a cuckoo inside his nest. “Who is the fellow?”

“He did not say,” said Miss Cecil. Her brow puckered a little. “But he thinks he can persuade her to agree to it.” She sighed. “I can only hope that the man will be kind to her, for we all need kindness, and Helena more than most.” She paused, collecting her embroidery to place in her reticule. “And so you see, I shall have no visitors in Sussex to remind me of London. Unless perhaps you should wish to visit.” Her black eyelashes lifted as she looked at him.

Pevensey felt his throat constricting. “I can promise you nothing,” he said, and the words came out more harshly than he intended. He could promise her nothing, for he had nothing. Not a home, not a living, not a life—or at least none of the quality that a woman like this expected and deserved.

“I am not asking you to. But you will think on it?”

“Of course,” he said, noncommittally. “Although I do not see much of a chance of it—Sir Richard rarely gives me a rest from my work. It would not be easy for me to get away.”

“Of course,” she echoed. He could see the disappointment on her face, mirroring the disappointment he felt inside. They stood in silence for a moment.

“I have something for you,” she said, reaching into the reticule

and pulling out a small white square.

He took it and unfolded it. It was a handkerchief, neatly edged with white embroidery and the initials "J.P." in green. His brow crinkled. The Cecils were wealthy enough to purchase generous gifts, but the generosity of this was something even dearer since the gift had been made by her own two hands.

Pevensey remembered the pockets of his great coat. "I have something for you as well." They walked out to the entrance hall together, and Pevensey retrieved his meager offering from the pocket of the coat, leaving the *papier-mâché* box of biscuits on a console table for Cecil to find later.

"A very pretty color!" she said, unwrapping the gift and finding the skein of thread. "I shall have to initial you a second handkerchief with this."

Pevensey looked at her eyes and saw that they were, indeed, the same blue. No, he could not visit her, but he also could not give her up completely. "Miss Cecil," he said, retrieving his hat and gloves off the stand. He took a deep breath. "Might I perhaps write to you instead?"

Her fair face broke into a smile. "How kind of you to suggest that —yes, there is nothing I should like better than your descriptions of life in London." Her eyes twinkled. "Although I shall not expect your letters to be long, for you do not like writing, I know."

"I shall pepper the letters with sketches," said Pevensey, his own face breaking into a reciprocal smile.

"I look forward to them," she said, offering her hand. He took it without any awkwardness, and the final farewell was said. He went out onto the steps, and the house door closed behind him.

But curiously, despite the bittersweet nature of the evening, Pevensey's step was lighter when he left the house than when he had come to it. The clouds of winter and the streets of London were fairer than they had been before. And once he arrived at his small flat, before he blew out his candle for the night, he pulled out a blank sheet of paper and some ink. His hand had already suffered the torment of writing one report for Sir Richard today, but despite that, he could not stop a little smile from playing over his lips as he traced out the words: "My dear Miss Cecil…."

Finis

Author's Note

Thank you for reading to the end of *A Duel for Christmas*. I hope you enjoyed the mystery, adventure, and romance of Geoffrey and Maud's story.

Like the other books in the Pevensey series, the characters in this story were inspired by characters from the Middle Ages and transposed into the Regency era. In A.D. 1120, the "White Ship" sank in the English Channel, sending King Henry I's son William Adelin to an unmarked grave at the bottom of the sea. The deceased William's only royal sibling was Maud (also known as Matilda). At the time of the tragedy, she was married to the Holy Roman Emperor and away from home in the area we now call Germany. But when her husband, who was twenty years her senior, gave up the ghost, Maud returned to her father's lands, hoping to gain the English crown although she was of the wrong sex to inherit it.

A few years later, Maud married Geoffrey of Anjou, a man eleven years younger than her who was known by the sobriquet Plantagenet. His lands lay to the south of her family's lands in Normandy, and he was reputed to be handsome and a great warrior. Like many dynastic marriages, it is unlikely that their marriage was a love match, but I enjoyed crafting a romance that might have occurred had they met in another time and another world.

At the death of King Henry, the English crown was claimed by Maud's cousin Stephen (whom I have renamed Stapleton). Aided by her faithful half-brother Robert (Ralph) of Gloucester, Maud attempted to do battle with Stephen for her rights, leading to eighteen years of civil war and anarchy in England. In the end, an agreement was reached whereby Stephen was to hold the throne until his death, and then it would pass to Maud and Geoffrey's son, the man who would be known as Henry II.

In my Regency world, I have made a few changes to the standard timeline and the real characters who inhabit it. Sir Richard Ford held office as a London Magistrate from 1800–1806 which sets the story sometime during those years. Sir Walter Scott's poem *Marmion* was

not published until 1808, and I backdated it a little to allow Geoffrey and Maud to make use of its beautiful verse. John Wedgwood, who founded the Royal Horticultural Society in 1804, *was* blessed with six children, but none of them were the formidable and fictional Anthea Wedgwood who was setting her cap for Geoffrey.

If you enjoyed *A Duel for Christmas*, please leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads and receive my everlasting gratitude. And if you would like to find out about upcoming books in the Pevensey series and beyond, sign up for my quarterly newsletter. Cheers!

Also From Rosanne E. Lortz



To Wed an Heiress (Pevensey Mysteries Book 1)

Haro Emison, thrust into his new role as Earl of Anglesford, discovers that his late father has left the family teetering on the edge of financial ruin. Intent on rescuing the estate, Haro abandons his long-held interest in his cousin Eda and searches instead for a wealthy heiress. But when pride and jealousy cause his plan to spiral out of control, he begins to wonder if he has made a dreadful mistake….

Eda Swanycke is enjoying her first season in London when her debut comes to a crashing halt. Jilted by her cousin, she suffers the indignity of watching Haro's new intended lay claim to his person and position. But when a brutal murder upends the household with Haro as chief suspect, Eda must put her wounded pride aside, match wits with the investigator from London, and try, at all costs, to save Haro Emison's neck from the gallows….

This novel, the first book in the Pevensey series, takes people and events from the Norman Conquest and transposes them into a lighthearted murder mystery set during the early 1800s.



The Duke's Last Hunt (Pevensey Mysteries Book 2)

With her third London season drawing to a close, the shy Eliza Malcolm seems unlikely to find any husband, let alone a titled one. But when the hunting-crazed Duke of Brockenhurst invites the Malcolms to visit Harrowhaven, Eliza's father jumps at the chance to gain a wealthy son-in-law. Surrounded by quarreling parents, tactless acquaintances, the aloof dowager, and the unsettling duke, Eliza looks for one person kind enough to help her navigate the murky waters of Harrowhaven's secrets….

Estranged from his brother the duke, Henry Rowland only planned to visit Harrowhaven for the afternoon, but after meeting his brother's intended, his designs are overthrown. As misfortune strikes Harrowhaven, Jacob Pevensey is called in to investigate. Henry learns that the only way to safeguard Eliza Malcolm's happiness is to face the past he has been running from for ten long years.

This novel takes the medieval events surrounding William II's death in the New Forest and transposes them to a Regency country manor. It is the second book in the Pevensey series, but can be read as a standalone.

Books by Rosanne E. Lortz

Historical Fiction

I Serve: A Novel of the Black Prince

Regency Novels of Romantic Suspense

To Wed an Heiress (Pevensey #1)

The Duke's Last Hunt (Pevensey #2)

A Duel for Christmas (Pevensey #3)

Copyright

Copyright © 2018 by Rosanne E. Spears
Cover and interior design by Masha Shubin
BigStockPhoto London in Winter © discoverydock; Regency Man © PeriodImages.com
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher and/or author.
ISBN-13 978-0-9962648-7-7
Publisher: Madison Street Publishing
Printed in the U.S.A.
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Contents

The Eve of Christmas v

The First Day of Christmas 13

The Second Day of Christmas 48

The Third Day of Christmas 79

The Fourth Day of Christmas 114

The Fifth Day of Christmas 129

The Sixth Day of Christmas 164

The Seventh Day of Christmas 180

The Eighth Day of Christmas 213

The Ninth Day of Christmas 233

The Tenth Day of Christmas 252

The Eleventh Day of Christmas 273

The Twelfth Day of Christmas 308

Author's Note 329

Also From Rosanne E. Lortz 331

Copyright 334

~